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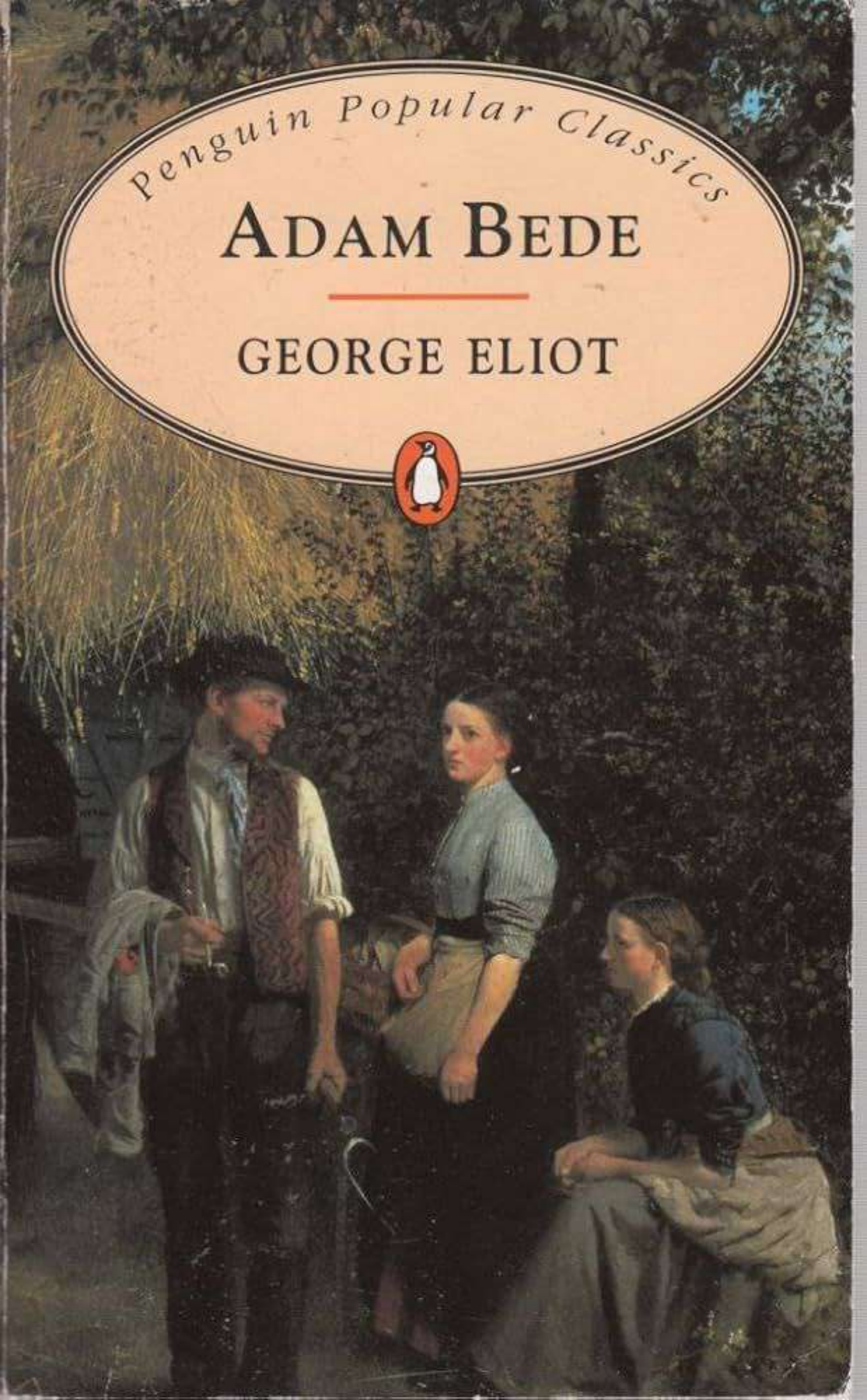
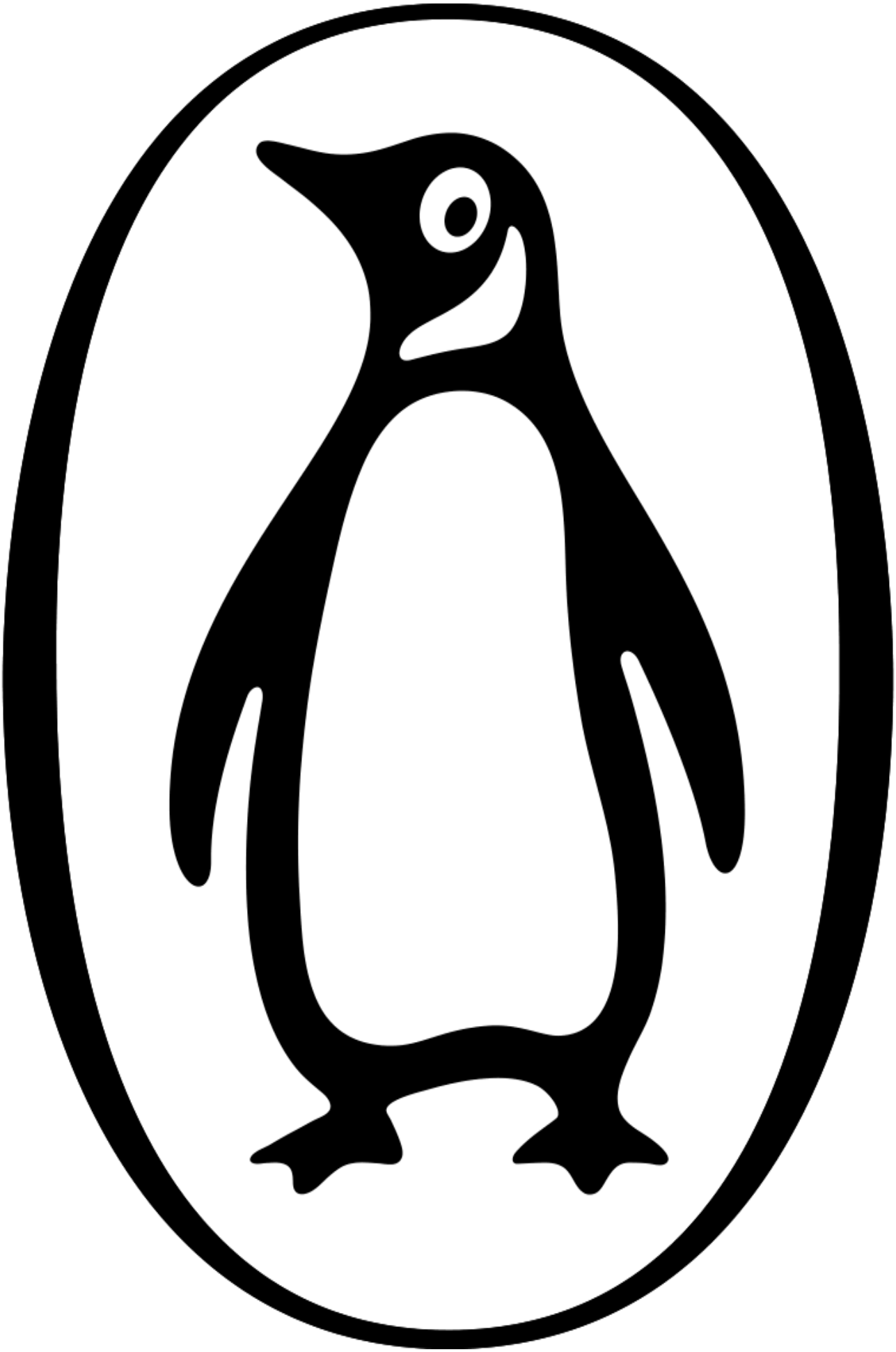
ADAM BEDE

GEORGE ELIOT





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MARY ANN (MARIAN) EVANS was born in 1819 in Warwickshire. She attended schools in Nuneaton and Coventry, coming under the influence of evangelical teachers and clergymen. In 1836 her mother died and Marian became her father's housekeeper, educating herself in her spare time. In 1841 she moved to Coventry, and met Charles and Caroline Bray, local progressive intellectuals. Through them she was commissioned to translate Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and met the radical publisher John Chapman, who, when he purchased the *Westminster Review* in 18 51, made her his managing editor. Having lost her Christian faith and thereby alienated her family, she moved to London where she met Herbert Spencer and the versatile man-of-letters George Henry Lewes. Lewes was separated from his wife, but with no possibility of divorce. In 1854 he and Marian decided to live together, and did so until Lewes's death in 1878. It was he who encouraged her to turn from philosophy and journalism to fiction, and she subsequently wrote, under the name of George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life, Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner, Romola, Felix Holt, Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda,* as well as numerous essays, articles and reviews. George Eliot died in 1880, only a few months after marrying J. W. Cross, an old friend and admirer, who became her first biographer. She was buried beside Lewes at Highgate. George Eliot combined a formidable intelligence with imaginative sympathy and acute powers of observation, and became one of the greatest and most influential of English novelists. Her choice of material widened the horizons of the novel and her psychological insights radically changed the nature of fictional characterization.

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GEORGE ELIOT

Adam Bede

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
MARGARET REYNOLDS

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Chronology

1819 22 *November,* born at Arbury, Warwickshire.

1824–36 Attends boarding schools in Attleborough, Nuneaton and Coventry.

1836 3 *February,* mother dies.

1837 After sister Christiana marries, becomes father's housekeeper.

1841 Moves with her father to Coventry where she meets Charles and Caroline ('Cara') Bray. Reads Charles Hennell's *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) which leads her to question her religious faith.

1842 *January-May,* the 'Holy War' with her father when she refuses to attend church. Beginning of friendship with Charles Hennell and his sister Sara.

1844 Begins a translation of Strauss's *Das Lebenjesu* **(4th** edn, 1840).

1846 *The Life of Jesus* published.

1846–7 'Poetry and Prose, from the Notebook of an Eccentric', published in the Coventry *Herald and Observer.*

1847–8 Nurses father.

1849 Begins to translate Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus. 31 May,* death of father. *June,* sets off for France, Italy and Switzerland with the Brays; they return to England in July. Remains in Geneva, lodging, from *October,* with the painter M. D'Albert-Durade and his wife. Begins journal.

1850 *March,* returns to England. Feels unwanted by her family and resides with the Brays. Decides to earn her living by writing. *October,* visits John Chapman in London.

1851 *January,* her first major article, 'The Progress of the Intellect', published in the *Westminster Review. September,* moves to London and becomes assistant editor of the *Westminster.*

1852 *January,* her first number of the *Westminster* published. Close friendship with Herbert Spencer.

1853 Working hard on the *Westminster. October,* intimacy with George Henry Lewes begins.

1854 *July,* translation of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* published. Leaves for Germany with Lewes. Begins translation of Spinoza's *Ethics.*

1855 *March,* returns to England with Lewes, and they set up house together.

1856 Trips to Ilfracombe and Tenby to collect materials for Lewes's *Sea-side Studies* (1858). Begins to write fiction, 'The Sad Fortunes of Amos Barton'. 'The Natural History of German Life' and 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', published in the *Westminster.*

1857 'Amos Barton', 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' and 'Janet's Repentance', published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine.* Assumes pseudonym, George Eliot. Writes to her brother of her relationship with Lewes and he breaks off communication. *October,* begins *Adam Bede.*

1858 *January, Scenes of Clerical Life.* Travels with Lewes to Munich, then to Dresden via Salzburg, Vienna and Prague.

1859 *February, Adam Bede. April,* interrupts composition of *The Mill on the Floss* to write 'The Lifted Veil', published in *Blackwood's* in *July. June,* pressured into unveiling the identity of 'George Eliot'.

i860 *April, The Mill on the Floss.* Trip to Italy where she conceives the idea of *Romola. August,* writes 'Brother Jacob'. Begins *Silas Marner.*

1861 *April, Silas Marner.* Further trip to Italy for research on *Romola* which she starts to write in *October.*

1862 *July, Romola* begins serialization in *Cornhill Magazine.*

1863 *July, Romola.* She and Lewes buy the Priory, Regent's Park.

1864 Begins verse play *The Spanish Gypsy. July,* 'Brother Jacob' published in the *Cornhill.*

1865 *February,* temporarily abandons her verse play, which is making her ill. *March,* starts writing *Felix Holt.*

1866*June, Felix Holt.* Returns to work on *The Spanish Gypsy.*

1867 Trip to Spain to collect material. Subscribes £50 to the foundation of Girton College, Cambridge.

1868 *May, The Spanish Gypsy.*

1869 Writes 'Brother and Sister' sonnets, and begins *Middlemarch.*

1870 ‘The Legend of Jubal’ published in *Macmillan’s Magazine.*

1871 *‘Armgar?* published in *Macmillan’s.*

1871–2 *Middlemarch* published in eight parts.

1874 *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems.*

1876 *Daniel Deronda* published in eight parts. Purchases the Heights in Witley, Surrey.

1878 *30 November,* Lewes dies.

1879 Preparing last volume of Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind* for publication. *The Impressions of The ophrastus Such.*

1880 *6 May,* marries John Walter Cross. 22 *December,* dies in London.

Introduction

(New readers should be aware that this introduction discusses details of the plot)

‘With this drop of ink at the end of my pen,
I will show you…’

> With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you…

The opening lines of George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* are enticing and memorable. However, as the beginning of the first full-length novel by the nineteenth-century’s foremost practitioner of ‘realist fiction’, they are bizarre. To be sure, we pretty quickly get to the historical setting of Jonathan Burge’s workshop on 18 June 1799 in which we are required to believe. But Eliot’s narrator has literally ‘conjured’ this vision out of the air by using magic borrowed from an exotic ‘Egyptian sorcerer’, even if she then brings it down to the practical magic of writing – ‘with this drop of ink…’ Commentators and annotators of *Adam Bede* have paid little attention to Eliot’s strange image, but in fact her metaphoric ‘mirror’ reflects a story which she would have read in 1852 at a crucial stage in the development of her career as a novelist.

From 17 January to 27 March i852Wilkie Collins published a series of letters addressed to George Henry Lewes in the *header,* a radical weekly newspaper which Lewes had founded two years previously in 1850 with Thornton Leigh Hunt. Entitled ‘Magnetic Evenings at Home’, the letters related a ‘scientific’ enquiry into mesmerism and clairvoyance – as displayed by Count P — and his assistant Mademoiselle V — – that took place while Collins was staying with friends at Weston-super-Mare. In the Fifth Letter he tells of the use of the mirror or ‘wishing-stone’ which was ‘a piece of wood… shaped like a hand-mirror… [with] a highly-polished oval piece of coal attached to one side of the wood, instead of the ordinary looking-glass’. A ‘wishing-stone’, Collins explains, had once belonged to the Elizabethan gnostic John Dee, and Count P — had provided himself with a copy of this object:

> Convinced that the old Doctor’s evil reputation among his contemporaries as a sorcerer had been solely derived from his knowledge and practice of animal magnetism, in days when new sciences of all kinds were fathered upon the devil, as a matter of course, our host [Count P —] conceived the idea of procuring as good an imitation of this ‘wishing-stone’ as could be obtained, and of rivalling the magic achievements of Dr Dee, by applying to it the magnetic process necessary to produce the phenomenon of *clairvoyance*.[1]

Here, then, are George Eliot’s ‘mirror’ that allows for ‘far-reaching visions’, and her ‘sorcerer’. For the ‘ink’, that is equivalent to the dark surface of the ‘wishing-stone’ and the exotic source of the clairvoyant practice, an 1867 article on Tndo-Mohammedan Folk Lore’ in *Notes and Queries* explains: ‘… the Lubbis in the South of India used the *unjun,* or shining globule, placed in the hand of a boy, to discover hidden treasure or stolen property.’[2] In Chapter 3 of his own novel *The Moonstone* (1868), Wilkie Collins describes the mysterious Indians using just such a method in order to find out the whereabouts of the diamond by pouring a splash of ink into a boy’s hand.[3]

In 1852, Lewes was not impressed, and replied to Collins’s account in ‘The Fallacy of Clairvoyance’, published on 27 March:

> In conclusion, let me say that the fallacy of clairvoyance is, I take it, the interpretation of a *dreaming* power as a *seeing* power. The clairvoyante (when not a charlatan) sees the objects of her dreams, and describes them; *what* those objects are depend mainly upon the suggestion of external stimulus, in the shape of words, tones, hesitations, &c.[4]

Marian Evans also was likely to have been sceptical. Nonetheless, seven years later she used this image to describe her own ‘dreaming power’ as a novelist, adapting the clairvoyant’s more usual visions of present and future to her own purpose in giving us ‘far-reaching visions of the past’.[5] In *Adam Bede* Eliot looked not only into the long past of the nation, but into the past of her elders – her father and her aunt by marriage Elizabeth, Mrs Samuel Evans (whom Eliot always called ‘Aunt Samuel’). More importantly still, she also looked into her own immediate past – the past that had made her into a writer.

Marian Evans into ‘George Eliot’

After the death of her father in 1849 the twenty-nine-year-old Mary Ann Evans had gone to live in Switzerland. In 1850 she returned to England, and the next year moved to London where she went to live in the household of the publisher John Chapman, and started working for him as managing editor of his *Westminster Review*. In 1852 Marian met Herbert Spencer, a social philosopher and journalist, and they soon became so close that there were rumours of an engagement. Whatever her feelings, they were not reciprocated. Spencer, however, introduced her to a man who certainly was interested – George Henry Lewes. But again, there were obstacles.

Lewes had been married to Agnes Jervis since 1841 and they had four sons. In 1850, when Agnes began a relationship with his business partner Thornton Hunt, Lewes had accepted the resulting child as his own. When a second child was born of the liaison, Lewes ceased to regard Agnes as his wife but, having condoned the affair, he was not in a position to sue, retrospectively, for divorce citing adultery.

Marian Evans was also a radical thinker, though one rather more hampered by the conventional strictures which bound respectable women's behaviour. Even so, she did the only thing she could: she let her relationship with Lewes grow. With him, she shared her reading, her aspirations, her fears, her desires, her table and her bed. When and where this first began to happen we do not know, but it was probably sometime in the winter of 1853 when Marian moved out of Chapman's house and into lodgings in Cambridge Street, off the Edgware Road. Then, in 1854, at the age of thirty-four, Marian Evans let this secret life become known when she left England for Germany in company with Lewes and – as it is politely put in all the biographies – she lived with him as his wife.

Though she was already an accomplished journalist and a successful translator of David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu,* from this time forward Lewes encouraged Marian Evans to fulfil her ambition and write fiction. She was soon at work on the first of the three long stories that were to make up *Scenes of Clerical Life,* and 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton' was published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in January and February 1857. Given Marian's peculiar situation, it was Lewes who offered this story to the publisher John Blackwood, saying that he was acting on behalf of 'a friend'.[6] Soon Blackwood was corresponding with Marian herself, addressing his letters to 'George Eliot Esq.' 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story' followed in March to June 1857, and 'Janet's Repentance' appeared from July to November.

Confident now in her own ability, and wanting a freer hand, on 5 September 1857 'George Eliot' wrote to Blackwood: T have a subject in my mind which will not come under the limitations of the title "Clerical Life," and I am inclined to take a large canvas for it, and write a novel.'[7]

In a journal entry entitled 'How I came to write Fiction', Marian Evans recollected that 'It had always been a vague dream of mine that some time or other I might write a novel… But I never went farther towards the actual writing of the novel than an introductory chapter describing a Staffordshire village and the life of the neighbouring farm houses.' Evans had kept the paper, however, and carried it with her when she went abroad with Lewes in 1854 'and one evening at Berlin, something led me to read it to George'.[8] Although this text does not survive, it may be that the sketch went on to become the opening to *Adam Bede* for Eliot was to retain that country setting in her first novel. Writing to Blackwood on 17 October 1857, she said, 'My new story haunts me a good deal… It will be a country story – full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay…'[9]

But it wasn't just the country setting that gave Eliot the impetus for her tale.

'My Aunt's Story'

In December 1856 Marian Evans had told Lewes the story about her aunt Elizabeth Evans and the young woman named Mary Voce who was found guilty of killing her child, and how her aunt had prayed with Mary the night before her execution and had gone with her in the cart to the gallows. In the next year, 1857 – so three years after she had begun living with Lewes – George Eliot told her family, including her beloved brother Isaac, the truth about her own relationship. Her family immediately broke off all communication. In October Eliot began to write *Adam Bede.*

We can trace this precise chronology for the composition of *Adam Bede* because Eliot wrote up what she called the 'History of Adam Bede' in her journal for 30 November 1858.[10] What we can only speculate on are the questions of why her aunt's story came back to her at just this time, and why it meant so much to her.

It is true that other women writers had tackled the subject of the 'fallen' woman and the unmarried mother. Elizabeth Gaskell had published *Ruth* in 1853; Elizabeth Barrett Browning had published *Aurora Leigh* – with its tale of Marian Erie's rape and consequent pregnancy – at the end of 1856. Eliot had read both books, and when she reviewed Barrett Browning's verse-novel, she remarked on 'its far-stretching

thoughts, its abundant treasure of well digested learning, its acute observation of life, its yearning sympathy with multiform human sorrow…'.[11] It is tempting to wonder how far the story of Marian Erie spoke to Marian Evans.

Whatever the personal element in her need to retell her aunt's tale, Eliot's decision to publish the story of Hetty Sorel was brave. Elizabeth Gaskell and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were respectable married women.[12] As 'George Eliot', Marian Evans retained – for the moment – her privacy, but she could have no idea how long that might last and, as it turned out, she was soon forced to acknowledge the fact that she was the author of *Adam Bede.* In tackling this subject, she was also taking the risk of exposing herself, and her precious relationship with Lewes, to the most prurient comment. But still she had to do it, and in some hidden way the fact of her taking on this particular subject, at this particularly difficult moment in her life, was deeply connected both to Marian Evans's sense of self, and 'George Eliot's self-construction as a writer. 'I love it very much,' Eliot wrote about *Adam Bede* in her journal, 'and am deeply thankful to have written it, whatever the public may say of it' ('History').

In *Child Murder and British Culture 1720–1900,* Josephine McDonagh points to an extraordinary fairy-tale account of her own young self that Marian Evans gave her friend Sara Hennell in 1848:

> Now over a quarter of a century ago there was a very young sprite who forsooth having turned out some respectable toads and a few indifferent lemurs and marmosets must fain try his hand on a human article and one 22^{d} of November he presented to Dame Nature at her evening levee a rough though unmis-takeable sketch of a human baby. The Old Mother had been rollicking all the autumn in the vintage and wanted no less than a winter's sleep to sober her. Being rather cross-grained in her cups she was in no humour to make the best of a bad business so she said, What have we here? in such a snappish tone, flourishing a bunch of nettles all the while, that the poor little Prometheus of a sprite began to look very snubbed. 'A pretty piece of work I should have to patch up this thing into a human soul and body that would hang together! Here,' she called to one of her Vishnu-sprites, 'smother it at once to save further harm.'[13]

In the end, the child is saved by the intervention of her friends: 'The poor sketch of a soul was found by the dark eyed maiden and those other bright and good mortals and they pitied and helped it, so that at last it grew to think and to love.'

McDonagh argues that the three key dates that are wrapped around George Eliot's account of her 'Aunt's Story' – 1802 when her Aunt Elizabeth prayed with Mary Voce, 1839 when her aunt told Marian about it, and 1856 when Marian told the story to Lewes – are all coincidentally significant dates in the legal and social history of infanticide.[14] But they are also key dates in Eliot's own memory of her self-making, taking her right back to her father's life – from which she would draw some elements in Adam's story – and her aunt's, and on to her own momentous life-decisions made in the mid 1850s.

The editors of George Eliot's *Journals* remark that during Lewes and Evans's second trip to Germany – when she was writing *Adam Bede* – Eliot's accounts of the art that they saw in various picture galleries suggest that 'Babies and children seem[ed] particularly fascinating to [her] at this time'.[15] The fascination – especially with children who are threatened or displaced – was to go into her fiction.

If, as McDonagh argues, *Adam Bede* functions around repressed memories and the return of things buried and forgotten, then no wonder 'My Aunt's Story' about a lost child was the one that 'haunted' Marian Evans as she turned herself into the writer 'George Eliot'. She had already imagined her adult self as a child escaping infanticide. Now, in the 1850s, Evans was remaking herself as an independent being and a writer – but the personal price was high. For in making that choice Evans had to sacrifice both the memory of the child that she had been – as she forfeited her childhood connection with her brother Isaac because of the irregular character of her union with Lewes – and – for the same reason – she felt that she had to relinquish the possibility of having children of her own. No wonder then that Hetty's predicament appealed to her imagination.

Mary Voce into Hetty Sorrel

When you look at George Eliot's own accounts of how she wrote *Adam Bede,* it is plain that it is the idea of Hetty that was the central point of her inspiration. The first piece of evidence is the 'History of Adam Bede' where she tells how she heard the story of Aunt Elizabeth Evans's night with Mary Voce for the first time in 1839 and how she told it to Lewes in December 1856. At that time, she noted, he 'remarked that the scene in the prison would make a fine element in a story'. Afterwards, came the idea of 'blending this and some other recollections of my aunt', and then, last of all, because she had to think of how 'to make the unhappy girl one of the chief *dramatis personae* and connect her with the hero', she invented the character of Adam based on 'one or two incidents' which were suggested by her father's early life.

So the imaginative progression in Eliot's mind goes Hetty, Dinah, Adam. Adam may have come to take on

the title role, but Hetty was the wellspring. In detailing the process of composition Eliot happens to say that 'The opening of the third volume – Hetty's journeys – was, I think written more rapidly than the rest of the book, and was left without the slightest alteration of the first draught' ('History'). In fact, Carol A. Martin, the editor of the Clarendon Edition of *Adam Bede,* argues that the state of the manuscript does not bear this out for it includes many alterations and corrections.[16] All the same, it is revealing that what Eliot (mis)remembered was the ease with which she wrote those sections.

The second piece of evidence is George Eliot's note in the fair-copy manuscript, now in the British Library, written on 23 March 1859, after the manuscript had been returned from the printers. When she decided to dedicate the manuscript to Lewes, she added this account of the composition of the novel. Some parts of it, she says, were written 'only once', 'among these the description of Dinah & a good deal of her sermon, the love-scene between her & Seth, "Hetty's World", most of the scene in the Two Bedchambers, the talk between Arthur & Adam, various parts in the second volume which I can recal less easily, & in the third, Hetty's journeys, her confession and the cottage scenes'.[17] This account of the readily rising parts of the composition also suggests Eliot's absorption in certain elements of her tale: Hetty again, Dinah, Adam and Arthur.

In creating the character of Hetty, George Eliot relied only for the barest details on her Aunt Elizabeth's story. The facts in the case of Mary Voce were entirely different from Hetty's, for Mary was older, married, of rough character, had been deserted by her husband, had had other men, had borne several children, had committed a number of petty crimes, and seems to have purchased rat poison with the intention either of murdering her child – or of taking her own life. Even at the time of Mary Voce's trial and execution there were discrepancies in the way her story was told: the three contemporary broadsheets give quite different versions of the tale.[18] Add to that the fourth story told by Elizabeth Evans, and then the fifth, as it is retold by Eliot in *Adam Bede,* and Mary Voce is lost to our sight.

But Hetty is fully in our view. I am not at all on the side of the critics who object to Hetty: to her prettiness, to her self-indulgence, to her daydreams, to her passivity in her predicament, to her obduracy. On the contrary, I find that I sympathize with Hetty, not because I care about her in any old-fashioned way as I 'make friends' with this literary sign, but because she – or rather George Eliot through her – makes me imaginatively realize what it is, or what it might be, to be a woman in a society and a cultural context that values certain kinds of women, and condones certain kinds of behaviour and condemns others.

If readers now are sometimes surprised by the revelation of Hetty's pregnancy, some readers then professed to be shocked by the novel's forthrightness. Far from the facts of Hetty's sexual life being secret, it seems to me that Eliot's account of what happens and how and when is as explicit as it could possibly have been in 1859. Certainly, many of those revelations are signalled in a literary code of symbols, or displaced imagery or metaphoric language. You have to calculate the timing of months and seasons, for instance, or you have to think about Hetty's red cloak, or note clues like Arthur's deciding not to worry about 'any bad consequence that was not demon-strably inevitable', or the reference to Hetty's 'more luxuriant womanliness' (Chapters XXIX, XXXIV). Or else you have to understand that drowning was so commonly a method of suicide for the unmarried and pregnant girl in the nineteenth century that 'Found Drowned' – as Hetty imagines herself (XXXIV) – meant much more than it said.

All these hints were obvious to contemporary readers of both sexes. Eliot's publisher John Blackwood guessed early on in his reading that 'The Captain's unfortunate attachment to Hetty will I suppose form a main element in the Tragic part of the story. I am not quite sure how far I like the scenes in the wood and I hope things will not come to the usual sad catastrophe!'[19] While the book was delayed in the press in December 1858, Eliot was worried about the 'evil' consequences that might attend on the possible disclosure of her identity because of the sexual element in the plot.[20] When the book did appear on 1 February 1859, the *Saturday Review* deplored the novel as part of the 'literature of pregnancy', while the *Examiner* felt 'bound to protest against the depiction in a novel of the stages of childbirth, related with almost obstetric accuracy of detail'.[21] For the modern reader, however, the untangling of these hints is part of the perverse pleasure of the novel, in that the reader's knowledge of what is happening and where it will lead, so soon overtakes the ignorance of the other characters.[22]

'the great crime'

But the thing that makes Hetty so important for our time – for any time of course, but still relevant now – is the fact of her having murdered her child. The very crime has different definitions in different social and historical circumstances and might be called by many names: abandonment, neglect, diminished responsibility, failure of care, abuse, murder.

Because most societies have a vested interest in sustaining the ideal of the sanctity of motherhood, child murder is often a taboo, and there are comparatively few infanticides in literature. There are many child-killers who are men – from the myth of Cronus devouring his own children in Greek legend, to Agamemnon surrendering Iphigenia to the altar, or Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac. But mothers who murder are rarer and more monstrous. In legend, Medea kills the offspring of her marriage to Jason, but she is also a witch who has sex outside marriage, betrays her country and her father, cuts her brother into pieces, has the rival to her lover's throne boiled in a pot, and sends a poisoned garment to her husband's new bride.

Josephine McDonagh describes the two specific literary infanticides that form a background to George Eliot's *Adam Bede.*[23] The first is that by Martha Ray in William Wordsworth's poem 'The Thorn' published in the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. This is of course the year preceding the opening date of *Adam Bede,* and, in Chapter V, Arthur Donnithorne receives a copy of the *Lyrical Ballads,* which he describes as 'queer, wizard-like stories', commenting that they 'seem to be twaddling stuff. The remark is a clue for the reader, and suggests Arthur's shallow understanding, for Wordsworth was a favourite poet of Eliot's and many of her epigraphs – including that for *Adam Bede* – were drawn from his work.[24]

The second (supposed) infanticide is by Effie Deans in Walter Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818). During the last four years of her ailing father's life, Marian Evans had been accustomed to read aloud to him for long hours every evening, and their favourite author was Scott. Though of course, as it turns out, Effie was innocent and her child survives.

Another literary infanticide that George Eliot would have known is by the speaker in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1846 poem 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'. Here the child definitely does die, strangled by his mother. But even while the poem makes clear that the despairing mother's motives are political – the child is the result of rape, he is too white, he is one of those who will possess the 'master-right' – the horror of the act itself is mitigated by the slave's residual instinct to love her 'own, own' child.[25]

As far as the legal story of infanticide goes, the statute which Hetty contravened and which condemned her, was the Stuart Bastardy Act of 1624 which decreed the death penalty for any woman who should 'either by drowning or secret burying thereof kill her newborn child. If the child had been born dead, the onus was on the mother to 'make proof by one Witness at least, that the Child… was born dead'.[26] This act was passed at a time when there was much public anxiety about the rising rate of illegitimate births and about infant mortality and child abandonment. By the eighteenth century urbanization and more efficient modes of transport meant that the problem was much worse as women travelled to some place other than their home town to abandon their (live or dead) baby.[27] As it turned out, comparatively few women were tried, let alone executed, for this crime, in spite of the fact that the legal burden of proof required to show that the child was born dead was firmly placed with the mother.

In 1784 William Hunter, a surgeon and midwife, who was sympathetic to the plight of the unmarried woman, published an address to the Medical Society, where he pointed out that many women, giving birth under these extreme conditions, were likely to be deprived of 'all judgement and rational conduct'.[28] Lawyers argued that the assumptions of the law as it stood were unworkable and inappropriate. It was eventually repealed in 1803 – just a year after Mary Voce's death. At this stage, the reason given for the change was specifically that judges were so often disposed to be lenient, finding increasingly ingenious ways of accepting the slightest evidence that the child was stillborn, thus bringing the law into disrepute. All the same, cases still continued to be brought under the Act, and the last execution of a woman for newborn child murder took place in 1849 – ten years after Elizabeth Evans told Marian her story, and just ten years before the publication of *Adam Bede.*[19]

'you don't get extra points for killing a baby…'

One hundred and fifty years on, and women who are accused of killing their baby may not be executed, but they are often condemned to a living death. In recent years in Britain much publicity has surrounded the conviction and jailing of women such as Angela Cannings and the late Sally Clark – both found guilty of murdering their infant children, and later released when some of the prosecution's evidence (and, in particular, the reliability of one of their key medical witnesses) was discovered to be unsound.

In September 1994 Caroline Beale was arrested at John F. Kennedy airport in New York where she was found to be carrying a bag bound to her stomach containing the body of her baby, a little girl, to whom she had given birth the night before in an hotel room. Her boyfriend had been out drinking. She delivered the baby, by herself, in the bath. She tried to wash out some of the towels she had used to mop up the mess. In the end she wrapped the bloodiest inside the other towels, and left them on the floor. She picked the dead floating baby out of the bath and put it in a bag. No one had known that Caroline was pregnant.

She was arraigned for second-degree murder and spent eight months in prison in New York's Rikers Island. Eventually she was released on bail but was only allowed to return home to England after she was persuaded to plead guilty to manslaughter. 'In the United States,' said the District Attorney who prosecuted her, 'you don't get extra points for killing a baby.'[30]

When my students read George Eliot's *Adam Bede* they often complain that it is just not possible. It is too unbelievable, they say, that no one noticed that Hetty was pregnant. But the fact is that it happens all the time. And, just like Hetty, all the time, frightened women – young, old, married, not married, clever or foolish, well-off or poor – try to get rid of that secret baby.

In Britain today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, babies are abandoned every week. In Germany and Japan, local authorities are trying out a scheme, based on an idea used by medieval churches, where a designated hole in the wall allows mothers to give up their babies anonymously.[31] Not all of these women are trying to kill their baby. Quite often they are trying to save that tiny life. In March 2001 an elderly couple living in Sawtry found a newborn baby boy on their doorstep. A few days later, after the police had asked the mother to come forward, the couple found a note on the same doorstep which said: 'Please forgive me. I had the baby on Saturday night while my parents were out. I am not bad.'

A Stage Adaptation, 1862

While it will always be an important issue, the topic of unwanted babies and child murder was a particularly fraught question when *Adam Bede* was published. The book was widely and respectfully reviewed, in spite of various papers exclaiming over the close attention to Hetty's pregnancy and delivery. All the same, the general reaction to the novel was so favourable that an adaptation was made for the stage and it was performed at the Royal Surrey Theatre in February 1862.[32]

As ever with such adaptations, it is not the faithfulness to the original text that is revealing, but the departures therefrom. In true melodramatic fashion the play hints at the catastrophe which will result from Arthur and Hetty's relationship early in the first scene. Parson Irwine reminds his mother that Arthur's uncle (not his grandfather) has made a will which disinherits him if he marries without his uncle's consent. The reason for this stricture is that 'the Colonel in his youth married below his position – misery was the consequence. His wife eloped with a scoundrel. The Colonel shot him and he has been a hard man ever since.' The scene ends, however, with Arthur and Irwine setting off for Hall Farm, and, as Arthur swears that he has no interest in the 'two pretty girls' there – 'Don't fear. I'm a stoic, a very St Anthony. They shan't tempt me' – Mrs Irwine brings the curtain down with the exclamation 'Oh these boys'.

Shortly afterward follows a scene where Hetty first meets Arthur in the wood, and then, on the evening of the dance, he takes her to the Hermitage where they are seen by Adam and the fight takes place. The curtain comes down on Act II as Adam cries 'Good heaven! He has struck his head against a stone', and ends with the stage direction 'Picture'.

Act III begins with Mrs Poyser remarking specifically that it is now *two years* since the unhappy events of the dance when Adam fought with Arthur. Arthur, we are told, did not die, but left to join the army and has not been seen since. If you know the book – though, of course, many people in the audience in 1862 would *not* have read it – this seems very strange. Is this 'two years' just a mistake then? Or some peculiar foil set up for the sake of Victorian decency?

As Act III continues, Hetty is found to have disappeared, and then the plot more or less follows the book, except for Seth attempting to reassure Adam that there is 'a gleam of hope':

> 'There was found near the body of Hetty's child,' he says, 'a pack of old playing cards and a fortune telling Book. Of these Hetty disclaims all knowledge tho' it is suspected she must have got her living by fortune telling. I have ascertained that there was a gang of gipsies in the neighbourhood and to them doubtless these articles belonged.'

Scene 3 of Act III takes place in a prison ward-room and replays the scene between Dinah and Hetty which is so central to George Eliot's story. But here Hetty protests her innocence and tells Dinah that she simply put the baby down for a moment to go and beg some milk and that when she returned 'it was not crying – and there was a child – it was dead – not my child – no Dinah – not my child'. Dinah assumes that Hetty's reaction was one of extreme anguish – 'it was enough to deprive you of reason' – but when Hetty tells how she buried the dead baby and left it, Dinah says, 'If this is known it will go terribly against you', before she asks, 'Hetty, tell me were you married to him?' and Hetty faints without replying.

In the following scenes, which return the action to Hall Farm, Dinah and Adam come to an understanding rather earlier than they do in the novel. Then we go back to the scene of the trial where Hetty protests her

innocence: T didn't desert it. I couldn't. I went to beg for it a cup of milk – and then when I came back it was gone – they had stolen it – give me my child.' In another curious departure from the original, Rachel Poyser is called to give evidence for Hetty's character, and she manages a little homily: 'The sin lies at the door o' them as tempted her and of your laws that are only to punish the weaker sex. The sooner they're altered the better.'

The play reaches a climax as Adam prepares to name the absent Arthur as the father of Hetty's child. At this point Arthur himself appears to announce… that he and Hetty are married. The judge insists that this is irrelevant, sends the jury out to consider whether or not Hetty is guilty of child murder, and they return with a verdict of 'Guilty'. Then, just as the judge prepares to pronounce the death sentence, Seth rushes in with a band of gipsies and… sure enough, Hetty's child… alive and well. 'She is acquitted,' says the judge: 'Tableaux. Curtain falls.'

And a Radio Adaptation, 2001

If Hetty's story needed some revision and a different ending (notably a marriage and a live baby) in 1862, the new set of historical and cultural forces at work in the early twenty-first century make George Eliot's novel similarly subject to revision and change.

In July 2001 the BBC broadcast a dramatization, adapted by Robert Forest and directed by Patrick Rayner, in a prime daily slot on BBC Radio 4. In one sense, this adaptation was true to George Eliot, for great attention was paid to the episode between Hetty and Dinah in the prison cell, and four whole episodes played out their conversation. In another sense, this was very much a production for a modern audience: Hetty came across as feisty, difficult, wanting more of life. She was allowed to be pretty explicit about what went on between her and Arthur in the Hermitage, and a heart-rending cry was put into her mouth as she complained that during those months of her hidden pregnancy, no one cared enough to notice: 'no one could *see me*'.[33] Her claim to a modern notion of the value of the individual life was also emphasized by the fact that, in the prison cell, it is Hetty who also forces Dinah to a 'confession', and that confession (using the scenes that actually come later in the book after Hetty's conviction) turns out to be that Dinah has fallen in love with Adam Bede.

However, as usual, it is the ending that tells. As in the original novel, Hetty's sentence is commuted and Dinah, we hear, goes to see Hetty on board the ship that will carry her to Australia. She reports that Hetty appeared eager to be away. Adam grudgingly meets with Arthur. Then he begs Dinah to marry him, pleading that it is her call to take him because he will 'be her cross' in life, given that he still cannot come to terms with his vengeful desire to kill Arthur.

But that wasn't quite the end of the story. In the last scene we heard waves and seagulls and the voice of Hetty singing one of Wesley's hymns. Someone – a sailor or another convict – asks her what she is, if she's 'No dissenter, and no churchgoer'. He goes on, 'What are you then?… Jew or Hindu?' And we hear her reply, 'Hetty Sorrel', to which he says, 'Hetty Sorrel, eh? And that's all?', and she says, 'Enough to be going on with – Hetty Sorrel.'

In 1862 it was Hetty's character that needed cleaning up for public presentation, so she had to be married and innocent of the crime. In 2001 it still has to be Hetty's character that is transformed as she becomes an independent woman, with a strong sense of self that will see her through, whatever her destiny. In both cases, interestingly, she survives.

George Eliot does not let Hetty live. It has often been remarked that Hetty's abrupt dismissal from the story, dying – as we are told in the Epilogue – just when her sentence of transportation has come to an end, is something of a letdown. Maybe it does seem so to a latterday audience. But Eliot's contemporary audience would have understood rather better. They would have known that the fate of a pretty young convict, subject both to the attentions and the cruelties of officers and other convicts, was hardly going to be a happy one. They would also have known that rehabilitation was impossible. A quiet life of penitence and reproach – away from her family – would have been the only one open to Hetty on return to England.

So Hetty disappears out of the story and Dinah's words end the novel, as they have dominated the story. For this is the other half of Eliot's inspiration for *Adam Bede.*

'George Eliot' into Dinah Morris

Before the novel was named, Eliot and Lewes referred to it between themselves as her 'Aunt's Story'. Her story, in that it was something that happened to Elizabeth Evans; her story, in that it was a tale she told to the young Mary Ann.[34] And it is words and storytelling, and the art of persuasion and rhetoric that become

important here. ‘Preaching’ by another name. That is the essence of Aunt Elizabeth’s story, and it is the essence of George Eliot’s art.

Eliot is said to be a realist writer. It looks like an easy term. There are, in fact, only two ways in which fiction can be ‘real’. The first is an emotional reality: for readers can indeed be made to feel by words, and that feeling – when it happens – is true. The second is a literary reality. For fiction is made with words, with structure and with form, and that certainly is real… ‘With this drop of ink at the end my pen, I will show you…’

The way that Dinah speaks in the novel was closely connected in Eliot’s own mind with the way that she herself wrote – and the way in which she genuinely felt as she wrote. In a revealing letter to Sara Hennell, Eliot said, ‘How curious it seems to me that people should think Dinah’s sermon, prayers, and speeches were *copied* – when they were written with hot tears, as they surged up in my own mind!’[35]

Dinah’s two major speeches frame the action. The first takes place on the village green at Hayslope, the evening sun making a picturesque setting as the rays illuminate her face and light up her impassioned features. Here Dinah’s audience is a whole community. But she makes only one convert, Bess Cranage. Her second ‘sermon’ takes place in the darkness of the night, enclosed, in the condemned cell, and alone with Hetty. And again, Dinah makes one convert – Hetty herself.

The method of each of these two speeches is the same; and that too is the same as the technique Dinah uses in the smaller virtuoso outbursts that punctuate the novel, whether her appeal to Hetty (Chapter XV), or her self-justification to Adam (Chapter LII).

The range of quotations in the two major framing speeches is also the same. Dinah’s text for her sermon in Chapter II, ‘The Preaching’, is Luke 4:18 where Jesus says, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me… to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised’ (Authorized Version). It is a manifesto entirely in accord with George Eliot’s own assessment of the moral role she adopted for her fiction. In addition, she draws on many other biblical references so that Dinah’s sermon starts with a story from the Bible, then a quotation, then there is a story about herself which parallels the present situation, then she implicates her audience – ‘you and me, dear friends, are poor’ – and explains how God is already in their lives in everyday cliches, then she builds on that by describing how they might allow him a larger, more active place in their lives, and she goes on to refer – effectively for the fourth time – to a preaching situation (Jesus, John Wesley, her own present, Jesus again), and she introduces another biblical quotation.

The technique sets out a theme, reverses it, writes variations on it, then introduces a second and third, returning always to all the different themes even where they are worked through in a number of different keys, major and minor, until the whole climaxes in a virtuoso crescendo which blends quotation, reference to ‘you and me’ and the preaching scene:

> ‘See!’ she exclaimed, turning to the left, with her eyes fixed on a point above the heads of the people – ‘see where our blessed Lord stands and weeps, and stretches out his arms towards you. Hear what he says… See the print of the nails on his dear hands…’

George Eliot read widely in preparing her research for *Adam Bede,* and the works of John Wesley and, especially, Henry Moore’s *Life of Mrs Mary Fletcher* (Birmingham, 1817) were her sources. In March 1839 Eliot borrowed a copy of the latter from her aunt, and ‘Miss Bosanquet’ – as Mary Fletcher was before her marriage – is mentioned in Chapter VIII of *Adam Bede.* The early Methodist preachers, but the women in particular, employed a rhetoric of preaching which became a familiar pattern, mixing public and private reference, including biblical allusion, personal testimony, direct appeal, surrender and submission and a call to active entry into a spiritual life.[36]

Dinah’s preaching also carries a musical analogy that is built into the narrative, offered to us through the medium of ‘the stranger’ who witnesses this first scene of Dinah’s preaching in Chapter II. He provides a discriminating focus on Dinah’s performance. He is the one who gives us eyes and ears. He is connected also with Dinah’s second large framing ‘sermon’, and that is the one that takes place in Chapter XLV, which is also introduced by a curious encounter with an ‘elderly gentleman’. In the case of the first encounter in Chapter II, we don’t know who that stranger is. He is simply a rider who happens across the pretty scene on the village green and who stays to be impressed by Dinah’s performance. The stranger takes on the role of informal witness. Or maybe he is even a formal witness, the representative of the reader, who does not move among the village people described, but who discerns their various relations, who can impartially criticize and assess, not only the village, but the impression Dinah makes on the village.

In the second case the stranger – who turns out to be the same man – is known and named. He is the governing Magistrate, Colonel Townley, the one and only person who has the authority to decree that Dinah may indeed be allowed to spend the night with Hetty in her cell. On this occasion, he does not

witness Dinah's speech, but we do, because the imaginative intervention of the novelist has allowed us into that cell to hear Dinah's words. On the first occasion of his two brief appearances the stranger-Magistrate represents the reader. And Eliot herself does not know who that reader – those readers – might be, so it is appropriate that he has no name. But on the second occasion of his appearance the Magistrate represents the writer – and so it becomes relevant that he plays an authoritative role. Only through the imaginative licence of the writer can the reader be permitted access to the dark and seclusion of Hetty's cell, and to the secret scene of Dinah's persuasion and Hetty's repentance.

In one of her best-known essays George Eliot includes a statement of realist intent:

> The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies… Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions… but it is serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-men, should be perverted, and turned toward a false object instead of the true one… [37]

For all that this presents itself as a plea for realism, it takes the form of a marked pattern of religious vocation in its vocabulary, and especially in the use of the word 'sacred'. If George Eliot's project is similar to Dinah's – the one by saving souls, the other by extending sympathies – then so is her form.

Dinah's spoken method – paralleling Eliot's literary method – is one characterized by collage and improvisation. Fragments and scraps of images, of pictures, of quotations, of allusions, asides and qualifications make up the weave of Dinah's sermons just as they make up the substance of Eliot's novel. Dinah's textual fragments are stories and allusions. In a similar way George Eliot herself kept notebooks of stray facts and ideas when she was preparing to write a novel. And Eliot expects her reader to follow the complex web of her references. On the surface of Chapter XII we see Arthur beginning to succumb to the temptation presented by Hetty. But in Eliot's buried allusions we can foresee the whole sorry story: a tapestry depicts Moses the foundling; Arthur sings a song from the Beggar's Opera, 'Would you have a young virgin of fifteen years?'; the narrator comments on his 'soft-heartedness' to 'the whole sex', a favourite phrase with the rakish likes of Lovelace in Samuel Richardson's Clarissa (1747–9), and refers to the Centaurs, famed in legend for their lusts; Arthur is reading Zeluco, the history of a seducer; and his Hermitage retreat is furnished with an 'ottoman' with all its suggestion of decadent luxury and enticing harems. The reader does not need to have it spelt out. The supporting themes woven into the allusive background of the text tell us that Hetty has not got a chance.

In the same essay Eliot points out that it is not reason that makes up the power of language, but the accretions of history:

> It must be admitted that the language of cultivated nations is in anything but a rational state;… one word stands for many things, and many words for one thing; the subtle shades of meaning, and still subtler echoes of association, make language an instrument which scarcely anything short of genius can wield with definiteness and certainty…

She goes on to imagine a 'clean' scientific language, but then rejects that possibility:

> With the anomalies and inconveniences of historical language, you will have parted with its music and its passion, with its vital qualities as an expression of individual character, with its subtle capabilities of wit, with everything that gives it power over the imagination… Language must be left to grow in precision, completeness, and unity, as minds grow in clearness, comprehensiveness, and sympathy.[38]

Her reader, then, must work to hear the 'music' that is in the layering of her text. Music in language is something that George Eliot believed in, partly because she knew that the musical form was one closely related to her own method in writing.

In an intriguing essay 'Notes on Form in Art' (1868) – not published in her lifetime – Eliot analysed a mode of artistic creation which is clearly related to her own. This method

> must begin with the perception of separateness, derived principally from touch of which the other senses are modifications; and… things must be recognized as separate wholes before they can be recognized as wholes composed of parts, or before these wholes again can be regarded as relatively parts of a larger whole.

She goes on to explain that it is this sustained discrimination between likenesses and differences that makes 'form' in art:

> as knowledge continues to grow by its alternating processes of distinction and combination, seeing smaller and smaller un-likenesses and grouping or associating these under a common likeness, it arrives at the conception of wholes composed of parts more and more multiplied and highly differenced, yet more absolutely bound together by various conditions of common

likeness or mutual dependence.

Emotions – hers and ours – are what govern the shapes and patterns of *Adam Bede.* Which is why the layering of reference, with its musical analogy of tune and accompaniment, aria and chorus, is so important. It is, Eliot argues, an 'organic' process:

> Poetic Form was not begotten by thinking it out or framing it as a shell which should hold emotional expression, any more than the shell of an animal arises before the living creature; but emotion, by its tendency to repetition, i.e. rhythmic persistence in proportion as diversifying thought is absent, creates a form by the recurrence of its elements in adjustment with certain given conditions of sound, language, action, or environment. Just as the beautiful expanding curves of a bivalve shell are not first made for the reception of the unstable inhabitant, but grow and are limited by the simple rhythmic conditions of its growing life.[39]

'The Two…'

George Eliot may be a moral realist and an exponent of literary Realism, but she is also a stylist, even if she would describe her method as one of 'emotional' style. One of the most interesting things about *Adam Bede* is its elaborate structure in terms of repetitions and doublenesses – a pattern which directly reflects the philosophy of 'Poetic Form' that Eliot describes in her 1868 essay.

Many things in *Adam Bede* happen twice. Hetty makes two journeys; Adam and Arthur meet in the wood on two occasions; Arthur and Adam both make visits to Irwine with Hetty on their mind. In Chapter XV there are the two bed-chambers where a set of contrasts is explicitly worked out. Hetty peers into an old tarnished mirror to see only the surface of herself, while Dinah looks out of the window at the moonlit scene, then closes her eyes 'that she might feel more intensely the presence of a Love and Sympathy deeper and more tender than was breathed from the earth and sky'. Hetty exerts her 'narrow bit of an imagination' to luxuriate in a future where she wears silks, where Arthur Donnithorne has his arm around her, while Dinah's imagination creates 'a thorny thicket of sin and sorrow, in which she saw the poor thing struggling torn and bleeding'.

Much later in the novel, in Chapter XLV, the essentials of this scene will be repeated and revised when Dinah and Hetty meet again, and weep together again in the darkness of the prison. As the narrator says, 'What strange contrast the two figures made!' (Chapter XV). But this method of comparing and measuring is one that informs the shape of the whole novel and one that the reader is, for the most part, expected to make, without explicit pointers from the narrative.

Even the key fact of the melodramatic strand in the novel is based on a doubleness – on a return. For, crucially, Hetty 'returns' to the site of the story of herself that she had tried to 'forget' when she buried her baby. And that return uncovers what would otherwise have remained hidden. If Hetty had never gone back to the wood and the hole under the nut-tree, there would have been no story.

In one sense this technique employs both stylized and realistic techniques. It is a contrived artifice, but it draws the reader in, so that we acquire a memory of events and significances that make a pattern of reference points. In this way it is a method that insists on a series of engaged responses from the reader. This begins with an emotional response, grows to one which is contemplative, and finally on to one which includes the promotion of a moral perspective where the reader must evaluate and assess the actions of the characters in the light of his or her own opinions and conduct in life.

Even without her own two accounts of the process, it is easy to see how George Eliot's own fit range of 'emotions' grew into the story that was to become *Adam Bede* and her first full-length novel. Her 'Aunt's Story' was linked in her mind with her own personal situation from 1854 – and so Hetty Sorrel was born. And yet that very period, so personally fraught, anxious and painful in many ways, was also the time when Eliot was becoming a writer, finding a voice, speaking out to the world – and so Dinah Morris was born, becoming, at Lewes's suggestion, 'the principal figure at the last' ('History').

Adam and Arthur

That leaves Adam – and Arthur. We know, because Eliot says so in her account of the composition of *Adam Bede,* that 'The character of Adam and one or two incidents connected with him, were suggested by my Father's early life'. But it was George Henry Lewes who perceived that Adam's part was 'too passive', and that he needed to be 'brought into more direct collision with Arthur'. She went on, 'This doubt *haunted* me' (my italics), 'and out of it grew the scene in the Wood between Adam and Arthur' ('History'). It was, unsurprisingly, *music* that gave Eliot the clue.

In the summer of 1858 while she and Lewes were in Munich, she happened to see a production of Gioacchino Rossini's 1829 opera *William Tell.* As the opera opens Leuthold the shepherd rushes on stage. Switzerland is under the yoke of Gessler, the Austrian tyrant, and Leuthold is being pursued by soldiers because he has just killed one of their number as the soldier attempted to rape Leuthold's daughter. William Tell rescues him. This is the first of several confrontation scenes, most notably that in Act III, where a maypole is erected in the marketplace of Altdorf to celebrate one hundred years of Austrian domination of Switzerland. Gessler has his hat placed on top of the pole and demands that the people bow down to it… which Tell, a Swiss patriot, refuses to do. As in *Adam Bede* the mix is one of sexual domination – effectively an invoking of *droit de seigneur* – and class conflict.

But I would suggest that it was the playing out of these oppositions in the *music* of Rossini's opera that spoke most potently to Eliot's creating mind. In the famous overture – the only part of the opera that figures regularly in the repertoire today – but also throughout the opera as a whole, there is a dramatic pattern of musical contrasts beginning with the evocation of the peaceful pastoral scene by the lake but then going on to the violence of armed conflict, then moving to the terror and pity of William Tell's defiance and the tender duets between the lovers, the patriot Arnold and the aristocratic Mathilde. Out of her encounter with this opera Eliot made the conflicted relation between Adam and Arthur. The doubt sown by Lewes about the need for a 'direct collision' between them led to 'the scene in the Wood between Arthur and Adam', said Eliot, and so 'the fight came to me as a *necessity* one night at the Munich opera when I was listening to *William Tell'* ('History').

So Eliot wrote the scene of the fight in Chapter XXVII and she offered a revised and reworked version of that episode in Chapter XLVIII. We are supposed to understand the parallels:

> The next day, at evening, two men were walking from opposite points towards the same scene, drawn thither by a common memory. The scene was the Grove by Donnithorne Chase: you know who the men are.

It is easy enough to read Adam and Arthur's relation as one 'between men' where the primary connection is to each other, and the woman over whom they compete is wiped out of the picture. But from the beginning it was 'their mutual relation to Hetty' ('History') that motivated Eliot's imagination, and Hetty is very much here in this second scene between the two men. And so the process comes full circle. Eliot's initial inspiration was the story of Hetty, and even when she makes the detour suggested by Lewes and brings Arthur and Adam into 'direct collision', Hetty is still her inspiration.

As ever, in a work of fiction that relies so heavily on the creative understanding and sympathetic response of the reader, Hetty's presence in signalled by a symbol that we recognize. In Chapter XXVIII, as Adam fetches water and brandy for Arthur, who is stricken by Adam's blow, Arthur rouses himself to find a light and search the Hermitage:

> At last he found a slight thing, which he put first in his pocket, and then, on a second thought, took it out again and thrust deep down into a waste-paper basket. It was a woman's little pink silk handkerchief…

It is the whole story of Arthur and Hetty's relation in miniature. But it is not the end of the story. In Chapter XLVIII Arthur is conscious of the whereabouts of the handkerchief as he re-enters the Hermitage with Adam:'… there was the waste-paper basket full of scraps, and deep down in it, Arthur felt in an instant, there was the little pink silk handkerchief. And at the end of the scene – a scene in which Arthur says to Adam, 'Haven't *I* loved her too? Didn't I see her yesterday? Shan't I carry the thought of her about with me as much as you will?' – Arthur retrieves the handkerchief.

I think that we are meant to believe him. Just as Hetty had once buried her baby and yet returned to the site of forgetting and to the fate that she can never escape, so Arthur too buries the thing which symbolizes his love for Hetty and of his betrayal of her (the point being that she undressed in the hermitage and so came to leave her handkerchief behind), and yet he returns to retrieve it and acknowledge the consequences that he cannot escape.

And Arthur again

When I first read *Adam Bede* as a teenager I hated Arthur. I relished the terrible irony of Chapter XLIV.[40] I wanted him to suffer. Now, I'm not so sure.

In the end, it is Arthur who is true to Hetty. Adam is comforted. He has a new relation with his marriage to Dinah, he earns and retains the kind of life for which he had planned, he has his children.

But Arthur has none of this. He has to relinquish his dream of being the squire adored by his workers and tenant farmers. He loses his health. He does not marry. He is left only with regret and the eternal

consciousness of the consequences of his wrongdoing, so that Hetty can never be out of his mind: ‘I could never do anything for her… she lived long enough for all the suffering – and I’d thought so of the time when I might do something for her’ (Epilogue).

And there’s something else that Arthur loses – his child.

In the novel, we are never told whether this is a boy or a girl, but I believe that the child has to have been a boy. So, without an heir, Arthur loses his estate too and the line is broken as the land will go to his cousin. There’s no legal logic to it, of course, because Hetty’s baby, being illegitimate, would not be in line to inherit in any case. But there is a symbolic logic that makes the formal pattern so essential to George Eliot’s method.

And there is also an emotional logic that connects this lost child to the artistic ‘child’ that Eliot created in writing *Adam Bede*… The story of Hetty – ‘My Aunt’s Story’ – was the source of Eliot’s inspiration in writing her first novel. It was a story of creation and destruction in a world where illegitimate offspring end up being sacrificed through fear and timidity in the face of social condemnation.

At one time in 1849 young Mary Ann Evans had imagined herself as a mortal scrap whose very existence was uncertain, fragile, and nearly brought to a premature end. Ten years later George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* was a ‘love-child’, the product of her unsanctioned union with George Henry Lewes. But, unlike Hetty’s child, Eliot was determined to allow hers to live, and her defiance of convention is there even in her story about her story: T love it very much and am deeply thankful to have written it, whatever the public may say to it’ (‘History’).

NOTES

1. William Wilkie Collins (as W.W.C.), Fifth Letter, in ‘Magnetic Evenings at Home’, *Leader,* 3:101 (28 February 1852), pp. 207–8. During the 1840s and 1850s there was great interest throughout Europe in many different manifestations of spiritual powers. Franz Mesmer (1734–1815) developed a theory of ‘animal magnetism’ which later evolved into techniques of hypnosis. Other popular practices included mind-reading (or clairvoyance) and table-tapping (or spiritualism). For a full account of the Victorian obsession with clairvoyance and other psychological experiments, see Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
   Eliot’s knowledge about the practices of the ‘Egyptian sorcerer’ also owes something to a book which she had read before writing *Adam Bede* and to which she returned many years later when she was preparing to write ‘Stradivarius’ (1873). In Edward William Lane’s *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians,* 2 vols. (London: Charles Knight, 1837), vol. I, p. 373, he wrote, T asked the magician whether the objects appeared in the ink as if actually before the eyes, or as if in a glass, which makes the right appear left. He answered, that they appeared as in a mirror.’ See Joseph Wiesenfarth, ‘George Eliot’s Notes for *Adam Bede’, Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 32:2 (September 1977), p. 128.
2. Tndo-Mohammedan Folk Lore’, ’Magic Mirrors’ byH. C, *Notes and Queries,* 3rd series, n (January-June 1867), p. 180.
3. Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone,* ed. Sandra Kemp (Harmonds-worth: Penguin Books, 1998).
4. George Henry Lewes, ‘The Fallacy of Clairvoyance’, *Leader,* 3:105 (27 March 1852), p. 305.
5. The ‘dreaming’ character of the novelist at work was to become an image that Eliot often used, most notably in the opening sections of *The Mill on the Floss* (i860).
6. 6 November 1856, *Letters,* II, 269–70 (see Notes for complete citation).
7. *Letters,* II, 381. For a full account of Eliot’s early life and the making of her career as a novelist, see the biographies by Kathryn Hughes, Rosemary Ashton and Gordon S. Haight; and Eliot’s letters and journals.
8. *6* December 1857, *Journals,* ed. Harris and Johnston, p. 289. For the complete chronology of the history of the composition and publication of *Adam Bede,* see George Eliot, *Adam Bede,* ed. Carol A. Martin, Clarendon Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. xi-liv.
9. *Letters,* II, 387.
10. See Appendix I: hereafter cited in the text as ‘History’. The phrase ‘My Aunt’s Story’ comes from the ‘History’.
11. George Eliot, ‘Aurora Leigh’, *Westminster Review* (January 1857), pp. 306–10; reprinted in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh,* ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), pp. 407–8.
12. The famous story of Elizabeth Barrett’s elopement with Robert Browning was a family secret at this time, and few people knew the details.
13. 23 November 1848, *Letters,* I, 272–3. Laura C. Berry also comments on this passage in *The Child, the State*

and the Victorian Novel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), pp. 149–50.

14. Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture 1720–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 132–7. See also McDonagh, 'Child Murder Narratives in George Eliot's *Adam Bede:* Embedded Histories and Fictional Representation', *Nineteenth Century Literature,* 56:2 (2001), pp. 228–59.
15. *Journals,* ed. Harris and Johnston, p. 304. On this theme see also Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).
16. Eliot, *Adam Bede;* ed. Martin, p. ciii.
17. George Eliot, Note on the composition of the novel, fair-copy manuscript of *Adam Bede,* British Library, Add MS. 34020.
18. See Appendix II.
19. 31 March 1858, *Letters,* II, 446.
20. 27 December 1858, *Letters,* II, 509.
21. *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage,* ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 73–6; *Saturday Review* (26 February 1859), pp. 250–51; *Examiner* (5 March 1859), p. 149. Both quoted in Eliot, *Adam Bede,* ed. Martin, pp. vii, xlix.
22. John Sutherland works carefully through the chronology and the hints on Hetty's pregnancy in his literary puzzle essay, 'What is Hetty waiting for?', in *Is Heatbcliff a Murderer?: Puzzles in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 110–16. His conclusion is that Hetty does not realize she is pregnant until Mrs Poyser gives her a lecture on the facts of life in view of her forthcoming marriage to Adam. I don't agree – Hetty lived on a farm, and doubtless knew what was what – and Eliot's novel is set in the late eighteenth century at a time when the legendary Victorian prudishness had not set in. That nobody *noticed* Hetty's pregnancy is another matter. But here Martin suggests that Eliot borrowed a detail from Walter Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* (1818) in that Mrs Poyser – who is the one person most likely to have noticed the latter stages of Hetty's pregnancy – is confined to her room throughout January in Chapter XXXV. In Scott's novel Mrs Saddletree, similarly sharp-eyed, is also got out of the way by this ruse (Eliot, *Adam Bede,* ed. Martin, p. xxii).
23. McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture,* pp. 123–53.
24. See Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
25. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', lines 126 and 120, in *Victorian Women Poets,* ed. Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 80–88.
26. For a full account of the 1624 Act and the legal history of the crime of child murder, see Mark Jackson, *New Born Child Murder: Women, Illegitimacy and the Courts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).
27. See Daniel Defoe, *The Generous Protector; or, a Friendly Proposal to Prevent Murder and Other Enormous Abuses by Erecting an Hospital for Foundlings and Bastard Children* (London, 1731), and Gillian Wagner, *Thomas Coram, Gent* (Woodbridge Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004). See also Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings:* Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005).
28. William Hunter, 'On the Uncertainty of Signs of Murder, in the Case of Bastard Children' (1784), reprinted in *The Proofs of Infanticide Considered* (London, 1834), p. 8.
29. Jackson, *New Born Child Murder.* See also Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings.*
30. Duncan Campbell, *A Stranger and Afraid: The Story of Caroline Beale* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 3–9, 35–7.
31. For this and other examples of current efforts to cope with relinquished children in various countries and cultures, see Kate Adie, *Nobody's Child: Who Are You When You Don't Know Your Past?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2005).
32. The manuscript of the adaptation is in the Lord Chamberlain's collection, British Library. As Eliot refused an application to adapt *Adam Bede* for the stage in 1879, I take it that the 1862 version was unauthorized. See Eliot, *Adam Bede,* ed. Martin, p. lxxxvii, n. 7.
33. BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour serial, 2–6, 9–13 and 16–20 July 2001, 10.45–11.00. Produced by Patrick Rayner, adapted by Robert Forrest with Thomas Arnold as Adam Bede, Katherine Igoe as Hetty Sorrel, Vicki Liddelle as Dinah Morris and Richard Greenwood as Arthur Donnithorne. I am indebted to Patrick Rayner and Robert Forrest for this information and their kind permission to refer to the script.
34. Eliot was baptized 'Mary Ann', and chose 'Marian' as an adult. She first used 'George Eliot' in a letter to John Blackwood written in February 1857.
35. 7 October 1859, *Letters,* III, 176. Quoted in Jennifer Uglow, *George Eliot* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 111.

36. See Mary Anne Schofield, '"Women's Speaking Justified": The Feminine Quaker Voice, 1662–1797', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* 6:1 (Spring 1987), pp. 61–77.
37. George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), in *George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings,* ed. Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 263–4.
38. Ibid., pp. 282–3.
39. George Eliot, 'Notes on Form in Art' (1868), in *Selected Critical Writings,* ed. Ashton, pp. 355–9.
40. According to Martin, foliation in Eliot's fair-copy manuscript suggests that Chapter XLIV, 'Arthur's Return', was originally to have followed Chapter XL, 'The Bitter Waters Spread', so that the full ghastliness of Hetty's predicament compared with Arthur's complacent anticipation was a second thought for Eliot (Eliot, *Adam Bede,* ed. Martin, p. xliii).

Further Reading

LETTERS, ESSAYS AND JOURNALS BY GEORGE ELIOT

George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings, ed. Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954–78).

The Journals of George Eliot, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

—, G. *H. Lewes: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

Kristin Brady, *George Eliot* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1992).

J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals,* 3 vols. (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood's, 1885; reprinted with additions, 1886).

Valerie A. Dodd, *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life* (New York and London: St Martin's Press, 1990).

Tim Dolin, *George Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2005).

Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998).

Frederick Robert Karl, *George Eliot: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990).

Jennifer Uglow, *George Eliot* (London: Virago, 1987).

SELECTED EDITIONS OF *ADAM BEDE*

ed. Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1996).

ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

ed. Doreen Roberts (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2003).

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Courtney Berger, 'When Bad Things Happen to Bad People: Liability and Individual Consciousness in *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction,* 33:3 (Summer 2000), pp. 307–27.

Laura C. Berry, *The Child, the State and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).

David Carroll (ed.), *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

—, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Michael Davis, *George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

Mark Jackson, *New Born Child Murder: Women, Illegitimacy and the Courts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

Deanna K. Kreisel, 'Incognito, Intervention and Dismemberment in *Adam Bede', English Literary History,* 70:2 (Summer 2003), pp. 541–74.

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William Mottram, *The True Story of George Eliot in Relation to 'Adam Bede'* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1906).

John Sutherland, 'What is Hetty waiting for?', in *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?: Puzzles in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 110–16.

Jerome Thale, *'Adam Bede:* Arthur Donnithorne and *Zeluco', Modern Language Notes,* 70:4 (April 1955), pp. 263–5.

Joseph Wiesenfarth, 'George Eliot's Notes for *Adam Bede', Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 32:2 (September 1977), pp. 127–65.

Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005).

A Note on the Text

The copy-text for this edition is ‘The New Edition’ published by Blackwood’s from 1873, both with and without illustrations, priced 3 is. 6d. This edition was printed from plates of the first one-volume edition published on 31 January 1862 (called the ‘Tenth Edition’ on the title-page). George Eliot made substantial revisions to the text for the 1862 edition, writing her corrections in a copy of the so called ‘Eighth Edition’ (published in two volumes in i860), which is now in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin and which includes a note written by George Simpson of Blackwood’s ‘Corrected by Author Nov. 1861’, recording the date of the publisher receiving the corrected copy. Eliot made hundreds of emendations to both words and punctuation, correcting inconsistencies in place and personal names, errors in dialect, and at least one anachronism.

While Eliot was making her list of changes for Blackwood’s she wrote on 25 September 1861, T have read carefully all through "Adam Bede" and "The Mill [on the Floss]" and have marked all the *errata* I have discovered. I hope the new editions will be carefully printed after these corrected copies… I am very glad… that I have given the needful time to "Adam"… for there were several mistakes which affected the sense in an important manner. It has moved me a good deal – reading the books again after a long interval, but it has done me good, for I can say a full Amen to everything I have written’ (*Letters,* VIII, 291).

The copy-text has been amended to bring the text into line with Penguin Classics house-style, that is: ‘ise’ spellings have been changed to ‘ize’; ‘judgment’ changed to ‘judgement’; double quotation marks to singles (with doubles inside); unspaced M-dashes to spaced N, and 2M-dashes to M; the full stop removed after part number, chapter number and title. Hyphens at the end of a line in the copy-text have been emended to the most usual form. Proper and personal names have been corrected for the sake of consistency; so the town is Rosseter throughout (not Drosseter), Irwine’s butler is Carroll throughout (not Carrol), Dinah’s Aunt is Judith (not Mary), Basan (not Bashan) and Dacey (not Lacey). Some missing punctuation has been silently corrected.

The first edition of *Adam Bede* was published by William Blackwood and Sons of Edinburgh on 1 February 1859 in three volumes, price 31s. 6d. Eliot maintained a close interest in both the printing of the text and the sales of her work. Most notably, she revised the passage about the willow wand and the nature of Adam’s superstition in the ‘Fourth Edition’ published *c.* 4 June 1859, and the substantial corrections that she made for the 1862 edition included her statement on the ‘realist’ project in the opening paragraphs of Chapter XVII. *Adam Bede* sold more than 15,000 copies in 10 editions over 3 years, and by 1879 some 80,000 copies had been printed. It was by far Eliot’s most consistently popular book, selling more than any other of her titles which were often promoted as being ‘by the author of *Adam Bede’*.

ADAM BEDE

BY

GEORGE ELIOT

‘So that ye may have
Clear images before your gladdened eyes
Of nature’s unambitious underwood
And flowers that prosper in the shade. And when
I speak of such among the flock as swerved
Or fell, those only shall be singled out
Upon whose lapse, or error, something more
Than brotherly forgiveness may attend.’

–Wordsworth[1]

BOOK FIRST

CHAPTER I

The Workshop

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past.[1] This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Bürge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.[2]

The afternoon sun was warm on the five workmen there, busy upon doors and window-frames and wainscoting.[3] A scent of pine-wood from a tent-like pile of planks outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder-bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window opposite; the slanting sunbeams shone through the transparent shavings that flew before the steady plane, and lit up the fine grain of the oak panelling which stood propped against the wall. On a heap of those soft shavings a rough grey shepherd-dog had made himself a pleasant bed, and was lying with his nose between his fore-paws, occasionally wrinkling his brows to cast a glance at the tallest of the five workmen, who was carving a shield in the centre of a wooden mantelpiece. It was to this workman that the strong barytone belonged which was heard above the sound of plane and hammer singing –

> ‘Awake, my soul, and with the sun
> Thy daily stage of duty run;
> Shake off dull sloth….’

Here some measurement was to be taken which required more concentrated attention, and the sonorous voice subsided into a low whistle; but it presently broke out again with renewed vigour –

> ‘Let all thy converse be sincere,
> Thy conscience as the noonday clear.’[4]

Such a voice could only come from a broad chest, and the broad chest belonged to a large-boned muscular man nearly six feet high, with a back so flat and a head so well poised that when he drew himself up to take a more distant survey of his work, he had the air of a soldier standing at ease. The sleeve rolled up above the elbow showed an arm that was likely to win the prize for feats of strength; yet the long supple hand, with its broad finger-tips, looked ready for works of skill. In his tall stalwartness Adam Bede was a Saxon, and justified his name;[5] but the jet-black hair, made the more noticeable by its contrast with the light paper cap, and the keen glance of the dark eyes that shone from under strongly marked, prominent and mobile eyebrows, indicated a mixture of Celtic blood. The face was large and roughly hewn, and when in repose had no other beauty than such as belongs to an expression of good-humoured honest intelligence.

It is clear at a glance that the next workman is Adam’s brother. He is nearly as tall; he has the same type of features, the same hue of hair and complexion; but the strength of the family likeness seems only to render more conspicuous the remarkable difference of expression both in form and face. Seth’s[6] broad shoulders have a slight stoop; his eyes are grey; his eyebrows have less prominence and more repose than his brother’s; and his glance, instead of being keen, is confiding and benignant. He has thrown off his paper cap, and you see that his hair is not thick and straight, like Adam’s, but thin and wavy, allowing you to discern the exact contour of a coronal arch[7] that predominates very decidedly over the brow.

The idle tramps always felt sure they could get a copper from Seth; they scarcely ever spoke to Adam.

The concert of the tools and Adam’s voice was at last broken by Seth, who, lifting the door at which he had been working intently, placed it against the wall, and said –

‘There! I’ve finished my door to-day, anyhow.’

The workmen all looked up; Jim Salt, a burly red-haired man, known as Sandy Jim, paused from his planing, and Adam said to Seth, with a sharp glance of surprise –

'What! dost think thee'st[8] finished the door?'

'Ay, sure,' said Seth, with answering surprise; 'What's awanting to't?'

A loud roar of laughter from the other three workmen made Seth look round confusedly. Adam did not join in the laughter, but there was a slight smile on his face as he said, in a gentler tone than before –

'Why, thee'st forgot the panels.'

The laughter burst out afresh as Seth clapped his hands to his head, and coloured over brow and crown.

'Hoorray!' shouted a small lithe fellow, called Wiry Ben, running forward and seizing the door. 'We'll hang up th' door at fur end o' th' shop an' write on't "Seth Bede, the Methody,[9] his work". Here, Jim, lend's hould o' th' red-pot.'[10]

'Nonsense!' said Adam. 'Let it alone, Ben Cranage. You'll mayhap be making such a slip yourself some day; you'll laugh o' th' other side o' your mouth then.'

'Catch me at it, Adam. It'll be a good while afore my head's full o' th' Methodies,' said Ben.

'Nay, but it's often full o' drink, and that's worse.'

Ben, however, had now got the 'red-pot' in his hand, and was about to begin writing his inscription, making, by way of preliminary, an imaginary S in the air.

'Let it alone, will you?' Adam called out, laying down his tools, striding up to Ben, and seizing his right shoulder. 'Let it alone, or I'll shake the soul out o' your body.'

Ben shook in Adam's iron grasp, but, like a plucky small man as he was, he didn't mean to give in. With his left hand he snatched the brush from his powerless right, and made a movement as if he would perform the feat of writing with his left. In a moment Adam turned him round, seized his other shoulder, and, pushing him along, pinned him against the wall. But now Seth spoke.

'Let be, Addy, let be. Ben will be joking. Why, he's i' the right to laugh at me — I canna help laughing at myself.'

'I shan't loose him, till he promises to let the door alone,' said Adam.

'Come, Ben, lad,' said Seth, in a persuasive tone, 'don't let's have a quarrel about it. You know Adam will have his way. You may's well try to turn a waggon in a narrow lane. Say you'll leave the door alone, and make an end on't.'

'I binna frighted at Adam,' said Ben, 'but I donna mind sayin' as I'll let 't alone at your askin', Seth.'

'Come, that's wise of you, Ben,' said Adam, laughing and relaxing his grasp.

They all returned to their work now; but Wiry Ben, having had the worst in the bodily contest, was bent on retrieving that humiliation by a success in sarcasm.

'Which was ye thinkin' on, Seth,' he began — 'the pretty parson's face or her sarmunt,[11] when ye forgot the panels?'

'Come and hear her, Ben,' said Seth, good-humouredly; 'she's going to preach on the Green to-night; happen ye'd get something to think on yourself then, instead o' those wicked songs you're so fond on. Ye might get religion, and that 'ud be the best day's earnings y' ever made.'

'All i' good time for that, Seth; I'll think about that when I'm agosin' to settle i' life; bachelors doesn't want such heavy earnins. Happen I shall do the coortin' an' the religion both together, as *ye* do, Seth; but ye wouldna ha' me get converted an' chop in atween ye an' the pretty preacher, an' carry her aff?'

'No fear o' that, Ben; she's neither for you nor for me to win, I doubt. Only you come and hear her, and you won't speak lightly on her again.'

'Well, I'n half a mind t' ha' a look at her to-night, if there isn't good company at th' Holly Bush. What'll she take for her text? Happen ye can tell me, Seth, if so be as I shouldna come up i' time for't. Will't be, — What come ye out for to see? A prophetess? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophetess[12] — a uncommon pretty young woman.'

'Come, Ben,' said Adam, rather sternly, 'you let the words o' the Bible alone; you're going too far now.'

'What! are *ye* a-turnin' roun', Adam? I thought ye war dead again th' women preachin',[13] a while agoo?'

'Nay, I'm not turnin' noway. I said nought about the women preachin': I said, You let the Bible alone: you've got a jest-book,[14] han't you, as you're rare and proud on? Keep your dirty fingers to that.'

'Why, y' are gettin' as big a saint as Seth. y' are goin' to th' preachin' to-night, I should think. Ye'll do finely t' lead the singin'. But I don' know what Parson Irwine 'ull say at his gran' favright Adam Bede a-turnin' Methody.'

'Never do you bother yourself about me, Ben. I'm not a-going to turn Methodist any more nor you are — though it's like enough you'll turn to something worse. Mester Irwine's got more sense nor to meddle wi'

people's doing as they like in religion. That's between themselves and God, as he's said to me many a time.'

'Ay, ay; but he's none so fond o' your dissenters,[15] for all that.'

'Maybe; I'm none so fond o' Josh Tod's thick ale, but I don't hinder you from making a fool o' yourself wi't.'

There was a laugh at this thrust of Adam's, but Seth said, very seriously –

'Nay, nay, Addy, thee mustna say as anybody's religion's like thick ale. Thee dostna believe but what the dissenters and the Methodists have got the root o' the matter as well as the church folks.'

'Nay, Seth, lad; I'm not for laughing at no man's religion. Let 'em follow their consciences, that's all. Only I think it 'ud be better if their consciences 'ud let 'em stay quiet i' the church — there's a deal to be learnt there. And there's such a thing as being over-speritial; we must have something beside Gospel i' this world. Look at the canals, an' th' aqueducs, an' th' coal-pit engines, and Arkwright's mills there at Cromford;[16] a man must learn summat beside Gospel to make them things, I reckon. But t' hear some o' them preachers, you'd think as a man must be doing nothing all's life but shutting's eyes and looking what's a-going on inside him. I know a man must have the love o' God in his soul, and the Bible's God's word. But what does the Bible say? Why, it says as God put his sperrit into the workman as built the tabernacle,[17] to make him do all the carved work and things as wanted a nice hand. And this is my way o' looking at it: there's the sperrit o' God in all things and all times — weekday as well as Sunday — and i' the great works and inventions, and i' the figuring and the mechanics. And God helps us with our head-pieces and our hands as well as with our souls; and if a man does bits o' jobs out o' working hours — builds a oven for 's wife to save her from going to the bakehouse,[18] or scrats at his bit o' garden and makes two potatoes grow istead o' one, he's doing more good, and he's just as near to God, as if he was running after some preacher and a-praying and a-groaning.'[19]

'Well done, Adam!' said Sandy Jim, who had paused from his planing to shift his planks while Adam was speaking; 'that's the best sarmunt I've heared this long while. By th' same token, my wife's been a-plaguin' on me to build her a oven this twelvemont.'

'There's reason in what thee say'st, Adam,' observed Seth, gravely. 'But thee know'st thyself as it's hearing the preachers thee find'st so much fault with has turned many an idle fellow into an industrious un. It's the preacher as empties th' alehouse; and if a man gets religion, he'll do his work none the worse for that.'

'On'y he'll lave the panels out o' th' doors sometimes, eh, Seth?' said Wiry Ben.

'Ah, Ben, you've got a joke again' me as '11 last you your life. But it isna religion as was i' fault there; it was Seth Bede, as was allays a wool-gathering chap,[20] and religion hasna cured him, the more's the pity.'

'Ne'er heed me, Seth,' said Wiry Ben, 'y' are a downright good-hearted chap, panels or no panels; an' ye donna set up your bristles at every bit o' fun, like some o' your kin, as is mayhap cliverer.'

'Seth, lad,' said Adam, taking no notice of the sarcasm against himself, 'thee mustna take me unkind. I wasna driving at thee in what I said just now. Some 's got one way o' looking at things and some 's got another.'

'Nay, nay, Addy, thee mean'st me no unkindness,' said Seth, 'I know that well enough. Thee't like thy dog Gyp — thee bark'st at me sometimes, but thee allays lick'st my hand after.'

All hands worked on in silence for some minutes, until the church clock began to strike six. Before the first stroke had died away, Sandy Jim had loosed his plane and was reaching his jacket; Wiry Ben had left a screw half driven in, and thrown his screwdriver into his tool-basket; Mum Taft, who, true to his name, had kept silence[21] throughout the previous conversation, had flung down his hammer as he was in the act of lifting it; and Seth, too, had straightened his back, and was putting out his hand towards his paper cap. Adam alone had gone on with his work as if nothing had happened. But observing the cessation of the tools, he looked up, and said, in a tone of indignation –

'Look there, now! I can't abide to see men throw away their tools i' that way, the minute the clock begins to strike, as if they took no pleasure i' their work, and was afraid o' doing a stroke too much.'

Seth looked a little conscious, and began to be slower in his preparations for going, but Mum Taft broke silence, and said –

'Ay, ay, Adam lad, ye talk like a young un. When y' are six-an'-forty like me, istid o' six-an'-twenty, ye wonna be so flush o' workin' for nought.'

'Nonsense,' said Adam, still wrathful; 'what's age got to do with it, I wonder? Ye arena getting stiff yet, I reckon. I hate to see a man's arms drop down as if he was shot, before the clock's fairly struck, just as if he'd never a bit o' pride and delight in 's work. The very grindstone[22] 'ull go on turning a bit after you loose it.'

'Bodderation, Adam!' exclaimed Wiry Ben; 'lave a chap aloon, will 'ee? Ye war a-finding faut wi'

preachers a while agoo — y' are fond enough o' preachin' yoursen. Ye may like work better nor play, but I like play better nor work; that'll 'commodate ye — it laves ye th' more to do.'

With this exit speech, which he considered effective, Wiry Ben shouldered his basket and left the workshop, quickly followed by Mum Taft and Sandy Jim. Seth lingered, and looked wistfully at Adam, as if he expected him to say something.

'Shalt go home before thee go'st to the preaching?' Adam asked, looking up.

'Nay; I've got my hat and things at Will Maskery's. I shan't be home before going for ten. I'll happen see Dinah Morris safe home, if she's willing. There's nobody comes with her from Poyser's, thee know'st.'

'Then I'll tell mother not to look for thee,' said Adam.

'Thee artna going to Poyser's thyself to-night?' said Seth, rather timidly, as he turned to leave the workshop.

'Nay, I'm going to th' school.'

Hitherto Gyp had kept his comfortable bed, only lifting up his head and watching Adam more closely as he noticed the other workmen departing. But no sooner did Adam put his ruler in his pocket, and begin to twist his apron round his waist, than Gyp ran forward and looked up in his master's face with patient expectation. If Gyp had had a tail he would doubtless have wagged it, but being destitute of that vehicle for his emotions, he was like many other worthy personages, destined to appear more phlegmatic than nature had made him.

'What! art ready for the basket, eh, Gyp?' said Adam, with the same gentle modulation of voice as when he spoke to Seth.

Gyp jumped and gave a short bark, as much as to say, 'Of course.' Poor fellow, he had not a great range of expression.

The basket was the one which on workdays held Adam's and Seth's dinner; and no official, walking in procession, could look more resolutely unconscious of all acquaintances than Gyp with his basket, trotting at his master's heels.

On leaving the workshop Adam locked the door, took the key out, and carried it to the house on the other side of the woodyard. It was a low house, with smooth grey thatch and buff walls, looking pleasant and mellow in the evening light. The leaded windows were bright and speckless, and the door-stone[23] was as clean as a white boulder at ebb tide. On the door-stone stood a clean old woman, in a dark-striped linen gown, a red kerchief, and a linen cap, talking to some speckled fowls which appeared to have been drawn towards her by an illusory expectation of cold potatoes or barley. The old woman's sight seemed to be dim, for she did not recognize Adam till he said –

'Here's the key, Dolly; lay it down for me in the house, will you?'

'Ay, sure; but wunna ye come in, Adam? Miss Mary's i' th' house, an' Mester Bürge 'uil be back anon; he'd be glad t' ha' ye to supper wi'm, I'll be's warrand.'

'No, Dolly, thank you; I'm off home. Good-evening.'

Adam hastened with long strides, Gyp close to his heels, out of the workyard, and along the highroad leading away from the village and down to the valley. As he reached the foot of the slope, an elderly horseman, with his portmanteau[24] strapped behind him, stopped his horse when Adam had passed him, and turned round to have another long look at the stalwart workman in paper cap, leather breeches, and dark-blue worsted stockings.

Adam, unconscious of the admiration he was exciting, presently struck across the fields, and now broke out into the tune which had all day long been running in his head:-

'Let all thy converse he sincere,
Thy conscience as the noonday clear;
For God's all-seeing eye surveys
Thy secret thoughts, thy works and ways.'

CHAPTER II

The Preaching

About a quarter to seven there was an unusual appearance of excitement in the village of Hayslope, and through the whole length of its little street, from the Donnithorne Arms to the churchyard gate, the inhabitants had evidently been drawn out of their houses by something more than the pleasure of lounging in the evening sunshine. The Donnithorne Arms stood at the entrance of the village, and a small farmyard and stackyard which flanked it, indicating that there was a pretty take of land[1] attached to the inn, gave the traveller a promise of good feed for himself and his horse, which might well console him for the ignorance in which the weatherbeaten sign left him as to the heraldic bearings of that ancient family, the Donnithornes. Mr Casson, the landlord, had been for some time standing at the door with his hands in his pockets, balancing himself on his heels and toes, and looking towards a piece of unenclosed ground,[2] with a maple in the middle of it, which he knew to be the destination of certain grave-looking men and women whom he had observed passing at intervals.

Mr Casson's person was by no means of that common type which can be allowed to pass without description. On a front view it appeared to consist principally of two spheres, bearing about the same relation to each other as the earth and the moon: that is to say, the lower sphere might be said, at a rough guess, to be thirteen times larger than the upper, which naturally performed the function of a mere satellite and tributary. But here the resemblance ceased, for Mr Casson's head was not at all a melancholy-looking satellite, nor was it a 'spotty globe', as Milton[3] has irreverently called the moon; on the contrary, no head and face could look more sleek and healthy, and its expression, which was chiefly confined to a pair of round and ruddy cheeks, the slight knot and interruptions forming the nose and eyes being scarcely worth mention, was one of jolly contentment, only tempered by that sense of personal dignity which usually made itself felt in his attitude and bearing. This sense of dignity could hardly be considered excessive in a man who had been butler to 'the family' for fifteen years, and who, in his present high position, was necessarily very much in contact with his inferiors. How to reconcile his dignity with the satisfaction of his curiosity by walking towards the Green, was the problem that Mr Casson had been revolving in his mind for the last five minutes; but when he had partly solved it by taking his hands out of his pockets, and thrusting them into the armholes of his waistcoat, by throwing his head on one side, and providing himself with an air of contemptuous indifference to whatever might fall under his notice, his thoughts were diverted by the approach of the horseman whom we lately saw pausing to have another look at our friend Adam, and who now pulled up at the door of the Donnithorne Arms.

'Take off the bridle and give him a drink, ostler,' said the traveller to the lad in a smock-frock,[4] who had come out of the yard at the sound of the horse's hoofs.

'Why, what's up in your pretty village, landlord?' he continued, getting down. 'There seems to be quite a stir.'

'It's a Methodis, preaching, sir; it's been gev hout as a young woman's a-going to preach on the Green,' answered Mr Casson, in a treble and wheezy voice, with a slightly mincing accent. 'Will you please to step in, sir, an' tek somethink?'

'No, I must be getting on to Rosseter. I only want a drink for my horse. And what does your parson say, I wonder, to a young woman preaching just under his nose?'

'Parson Irwine, sir, doesn't live here;[5] he lives at Brox'on, over the hill there. The parsonage here's a tumble-down place, sir, not fit for gentry to live in. He comes here to preach of a Sunday afternoon, sir, an' puts up his hoss here. It's a grey cob,[6] sir, an' he sets great store by't. He's allays put up his hoss here, sir, iver since before I hed the Donnithorne Arms. I'm not this countryman, you may tell by my tongue, sir. They're cur'ous talkers i' this country, sir; the gentry's hard work to hunderstand 'em. I was brought hup among the gentry, sir, an' got the turn o' their tongue when I was a bye. Why, what do you think the folks here says for "hevn't you"? — the gentry, you know, says, "hevn't you" — well, the people about here says "hanna yey". It's what they call the dileck as is spoke hereabout, sir. That's what I've heard Squire Donnithorne say many a time; it's the dileck, says he.'

'Ay, ay,' said the stranger, smiling. 'I know it very well. But you've not got many Methodists about here,

surely — in this agricultural spot? I should have thought there would hardly be such a thing as a Methodist to be found about here. You're all farmers, aren't you? The Methodists can seldom lay much hold on *them*.'

'Why, sir, there's a pretty lot o' workmen round about, sir. There's Mester Bürge as owns the timber-yard over there, he underteks a good bit o' building an' repairs. An' there's the stone-pits not far off. There's plenty of emply i' this countryside, sir. An' there's a fine batch o' Methodisses at Treddles'on – that's the market-town about three mile off — you'll maybe ha' come through it, sir. There's pretty nigh a score of 'em on the Green now, as come from there. That's where our people gets it from, though there's only two men of 'em in all Hayslope: that's Will Maskery, the wheelwright, and Seth Bede, a young man as works at the carpenterin'.'

'The preacher comes from Treddleston, then, does she?'

'Nay, sir, she comes out o' Stonyshire, pretty nigh thirty mile off. But she's a-visitin' hereabout at Mester Poyser's at the Hall Farm — it's them barns an' big walnut trees, right away to the left, sir. She's own niece to Poyser's wife, an' they'll be fine an' vexed at her for making a fool of herself i' that way. But I've heared as there's no holding these Methodisses when the maggit's once got i' their head: many of 'em goes stark starin' mad wi' their religion. Though this young woman's quiet enough to look at, by what I can make out; I've not seen her myself.'

'Well, I wish I had time to wait and see her, but I must get on. I've been out of my way for the last twenty minutes, to have a look at that place in the valley. It's Squire Donnithorne's, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir, that's Donnithorne Chase, that is. Fine hoaks there, isn't there, sir? I should know what it is, sir, for I've lived butler there a-going i' fifteen year. It's Captain Donnithorne as is th' heir, sir — Squire Donnithorne's grandson. He'll be comin' of hage this 'ay-'arvest, sir, an' we shall hev fine doins. He owns all the land about here, sir, Squire Donnithorne does.'

'Well, it's a pretty spot, whoever may own it,' said the traveller, mounting his horse; 'and one meets some fine strapping fellows about too. I met as fine a young fellow as ever I saw in my life, about half an hour ago, before I came up the hill — a carpenter, a tall broad-shouldered fellow with black hair and black eyes, marching along like a soldier. We want such fellows as he to lick the French.'

'Ay, sir, that's Adam Bede, that is, I'll be bound — Thias Bede's son — everybody knows him hereabout. He's an uncommon clever stiddy fellow, an' wonderful strong. Lord bless you, sir — if you'll hexcuse me for saying so — he can walk forty mile a-day, an' lift a matter o' sixty ston'. He's an uncommon favourite wi' the gentry, sir: Captain Donnithorne and Parson Irwine meks a fine fuss wi' him. But he's a little lifted up an' peppery-like.'

'Well, good evening to you, landlord; I must get on.'

'Your servant, sir; good evenin'.'

The traveller put his horse into a quick walk up the village, but when he approached the Green, the beauty of the view that lay on his right hand, the singular contrast presented by the groups of villagers with the knot of Methodists near the maple, and perhaps yet more, curiosity to see the young female preacher, proved too much for his anxiety to get to the end of his journey, and he paused.

The Green lay at the extremity of the village, and from it the road branched off in two directions, one leading farther up the hill by the church, and the other winding gently down towards the valley. On the side of the Green that led towards the church, the broken line of thatched cottages was continued nearly to the churchyard gate; but on the opposite, north-western side, there was nothing to obstruct the view of gently-swelling meadow, and wooded valley, and dark masses of distant hill. That rich undulating district of Loamshire to which Hayslope belonged, lies close to a grim outskirt of Stonyshire, overlooked by its barren hills as a pretty blooming sister may sometimes be seen linked in the arm of a rugged, tall, swarthy brother; and in two or three hours' ride the traveller might exchange a bleak treeless region, intersected by lines of cold grey stone, for one where his road wound under the shelter of woods, or up swelling hills, muffled with hedgerows and long meadow-grass and thick corn; and where at every turn he came upon some fine old country-seat nestled in the valley or crowning the slope, some homestead with its long length of barn and its cluster of golden ricks, some grey steeple looking out from a pretty confusion of trees and thatch and dark-red tiles. It was just such a picture as this last that Hayslope Church had made to the traveller as he began to mount the gentle slope leading to its pleasant uplands, and now from his station near the Green he had before him in one view nearly all the other typical features of this pleasant land. High up against the horizon were the huge conical masses of hill, like giant mounds intended to fortify this region of corn and grass against the keen and hungry winds of the north; not distant enough to be clothed in purple mystery, but with sombre greenish sides visibly specked with sheep, whose motion was only revealed by memory, not detected by sight; wooed from day to day by the changing hours, but responding with no change in themselves – left for ever grim and sullen after the flush of morning, the winged gleams of the April

noonday, the parting crimson glory of the ripening summer sun. And directly below them the eye rested on a more advanced line of hanging woods, divided by bright patches of pasture or furrowed crops, and not yet deepened into the uniform leafy curtains of high summer, but still showing the warm tints of the young oak and the tender green of the ash and lime. Then came the valley, where the woods grew thicker, as if they had rolled down and hurried together from the patches left smooth on the slope, that they might take the better care of the tall mansion which lifted its parapets and sent its faint blue summer smoke among them. Doubtless there was a large sweep of park and a broad glassy pool in front of that mansion, but the swelling slope of meadow would not let our traveller see them from the village green. He saw instead a foreground which was just as lovely – the level sunlight lying like transparent gold among the gently-curving stems of the feathered grass and the tall red sorrel, and the white umbels[7] of the hemlocks lining the bushy hedgerows. It was that moment in summer when the sound of the scythe being whetted makes us cast more lingering looks at the flower-sprinkled tresses of the meadows.

He might have seen other beauties in the landscape if he had turned a little in his saddle and looked eastward, beyond Jonathan Burge's pasture and woodyard towards the green corn-fields and walnut-trees of the Hall Farm; but apparently there was more interest for him in the living groups close at hand. Every generation in the village was there, from old 'Feyther Taft' in his brown worsted night-cap, who was bent nearly double, but seemed tough enough to keep on his legs a long while, leaning on his short stick, down to the babies with their little round heads lolling forward in quilted linen caps. Now and then there was a new arrival; perhaps a slouching labourer, who, having eaten his supper, came out to look at the unusual scene with a slow bovine gaze, willing to hear what any one had to say in explanation of it, but by no means excited enough to ask a question. But all took care not to join the Methodists on the Green, and identify themselves in that way with the expectant audience, for there was not one of them that would not have disclaimed the imputation of having come out to hear the 'preacher-woman', — they had only come out to see 'what war a-goin' on, like'. The men were chiefly gathered in the neighbourhood of the blacksmith's shop. But do not imagine them gathered in a knot. Villagers never swarm: a whisper is unknown among them, and they seem almost as incapable of an undertone as a cow or a stag. Your true rustic turns his back on his interlocutor, throwing a question over his shoulder as if he meant to run away from the answer, and walking a step or two farther off when the interest of the dialogue culminates. So the group in the vicinity of the blacksmith's door was by no means a close one, and formed no screen in front of Chad Cranage, the blacksmith himself, who stood with his black brawny arms folded, leaning against the door-post, and occasionally sending forth a bellowing laugh at his own jokes, giving them a marked preference over the sarcasms of Wiry Ben, who had renounced the pleasures of the Holly Bush for the sake of seeing life under a new form. But both styles of wit were treated with equal contempt by Mr Joshua Rann. Mr Rann's leathern apron and subdued griminess can leave no one in any doubt that he is the village shoemaker; the thrusting out of his chin and stomach, and the twirling of his thumbs, are more subtle indications, intended to prepare unwary strangers for the discovery that they are in the presence of the parish clerk. 'Old Joshway', as he is irreverently called by his neighbours, is in a state of simmering indignation; but he has not yet opened his lips except to say, in a resounding bass undertone, like the tuning of a violoncello, 'Sehon, King of the Amorites: for His mercy endureth for ever; and Og the King of Basan: for His mercy endureth for ever',[8] – a quotation which may seem to have slight bearing on the present occasion, but, as with every other anomaly, adequate knowledge will show it to be a natural sequence. Mr Rann was inwardly maintaining the dignity of the Church in the face of this scandalous irruption of Methodism, and as that dignity was bound up with his own sonorous utterance of the responses, his argument naturally suggested a quotation from the psalm he had read the last Sunday afternoon.

The stronger curiosity of the women had drawn them quite to the edge of the Green, where they could examine more closely the Quaker-like costume[9] and odd deportment of the female Methodists. Underneath the maple there was a small cart which had been brought from the wheelwright's to serve as a pulpit, and round this a couple of benches and a few chairs had been placed. Some of the Methodists were resting on these, with their eyes closed, as if wrapt in prayer or meditation. Others chose to continue standing, and had turned their faces towards the villagers with a look of melancholy compassion, which was highly amusing to Bessy Cranage, the blacksmith's buxom daughter, known to her neighbours as Chad's Bess, who wondered 'why the folks war a-makin' faces a that'ns'. Chad's Bess was the object of peculiar compassion, because her hair, being turned back under a cap which was set at the top of her head, exposed to view an ornament of which she was much prouder than of her red cheeks, namely, a pair of large round earrings with false garnets in them, ornaments contemned not only by the Methodists, but by her own cousin and namesake Timothy's Bess, who, with much cousinly feeling, often wished 'them earrings' might come to good.

Timothy's Bess, though retaining her maiden appellation among her familiars, had long been the wife of Sandy Jim, and possessed a handsome set of matronly jewels, of which it is enough to mention the heavy baby she was rocking in her arms, and the sturdy fellow of five in knee-breeches, and red legs, who had a rusty milk-can round his neck by way of drum, and was very carefully avoided by Chad's small terrier. This young olive-branch,[10] notorious under the name of Timothy's Bess's Ben, being of an inquiring disposition, unchecked by any false modesty, had advanced beyond the group of women and children, and was walking round the Methodists, looking up in their faces with his mouth wide open, and beating his stick against the milk-can by way of musical accompaniment. But one of the elderly women bending down to take him by the shoulder, with an air of grave remonstrance, Timothy's Bess's Ben first kicked out vigorously, then took to his heels and sought refuge behind his father's legs.

'Ye gallows young dog,'[11] said Sandy Jim, with some paternal pride, 'if ye donna keep that stick quiet, I'll tek it from ye. What d'ye mane by kickin' foulks?'

'Here! gie him here to me, Jim,' said Chad Cranage; 'I'll tie him up an' shoe him as I do th' hosses. Well, Mester Casson,' he continued, as that personage sauntered up towards the group of men, 'how are ye t' naight? Are ye coom t' help groon?[12] They say folks allays groon when they're hearkenin' to th' Methodys, as if they war bad i' th' inside. I mane to groon as loud as your cow did th' other naight, an' then the praicher 'ull think I'm i' th' raight way.'

'I'd advise you not to be up to no nonsense, Chad,' said Mr Casson, with some dignity; 'Poyser wouldn't like to hear as his wife's niece was treated any ways disrespectful, for all he mayn't be fond of her taking on herself to preach.'

'Ay, an' she's a pleasant-looked un too,' said Wiry Ben. 'I'll stick up for the pretty women preachin'; I know they'd persuade me over a deal sooner nor th' ugly men. I shouldna wonder if I turn Methody afore the night's out, an' begin to coort the preacher, like Seth Bede.'

'Why, Seth's looking rether too high, I should think,' said Mr Casson. 'This woman's kin wouldn't like her to demean herself to a common carpenter.'

'Tchu!' said Ben, with a long treble intonation, 'what's folks's kin got to do wi't? – Not a chip. Poyser's wife may turn her nose up an' forget bygones, but this Dinah[13] Morris, they tell me, 's as poor as iver she was – works at a mill,[14] an's much ado to keep hersen. A strappin' young carpenter as is a ready-made Methody, like Seth, wouldna be a bad match for her. Why, Poysers make as big a fuss wi' Adam Bede as if he war a nevvy o' their own.'

'Idle talk! idle talk!' said Mr Joshua Rann. 'Adam an' Seth's two men; you wunna fit them two wi' the same last.'

'Maybe,' said Wiry Ben, contemptuously, 'but Seth's the lad for me, though he war a Methody twice o'er. I'm fair beat wi' Seth, for I've been teazin' him iver sin' we've been workin' together, an' he bears me no more malice nor a lamb. An' he's a stout-hearted feller too, for when we saw the old tree all a-flre a-comin' across the fields one night, an' we thought as it war a boguy, Seth made no more ado, but he up to't as bold as a constable. Why, there he comes out o' Will Maskery's; an' there's Will hisself, lookin' as meek as if he couldna knock a nail o' the head for fear o' hurtin't. An' there's the pretty preacher-woman! My eye, she's got her bonnet off. I mun go a bit nearer.'

Several of the men followed Ben's lead, and the traveller pushed his horse on to the Green, as Dinah walked rather quickly, and in advance of her companions, towards the cart under the maple-tree. While she was near Seth's tall figure, she looked short, but when she had mounted the cart, and was away from all comparison, she seemed above the middle height of woman, though in reality she did not exceed it – an effect which was due to the slimness of her figure, and the simple line of her black stuff dress. The stranger was struck with surprise as he saw her approach and mount the cart – surprise, not so much at the feminine delicacy of her appearance, as at the total absence of self-consciousness in her demeanour. He had made up his mind to see her advance with a measured step, and a demure solemnity of countenance; he had felt sure that her face would be mantled with the smile of conscious saintship, or else charged with denunciatory bitterness. He knew but two types of Methodist – the ecstatic and the bilious. But Dinah walked as simply as if she were going to market, and seemed as unconscious of her outward appearance as a little boy: there was no blush, no tremulousness, which said, 'I know you think me a pretty woman, too young to preach'; no casting up or down of the eyelids, no compression of the lips, no attitude of the arms, that said, 'But you must think of me as a saint.' She held no book in her ungloved hands, but let them hang down lightly crossed before her, as she stood and turned her grey eyes on the people. There was no keenness in the eyes; they seemed rather to be shedding love than making observations; they had the liquid look which tells that the mind is full of what it has to give out, rather than impressed by external objects. She stood with her left hand towards the descending sun, and leafy boughs screened her from its rays; but in this sober light the delicate colouring of her face seemed to gather a calm vividness, like flowers at evening. It was a small oval

face, of a uniform transparent whiteness, with an egg-like line of cheek and chin, a full but firm mouth, a delicate nostril, and a low perpendicular brow, surmounted by a rising arch of parting between smooth locks of pale reddish hair. The hair was drawn straight back behind the ears, and covered, except for an inch or two, above the brow, by a net Quaker cap. The eyebrows, of the same colour as the hair, were perfectly horizontal and firmly pencilled; the eyelashes, though no darker, were long and abundant; nothing was left blurred or unfinished. It was one of those faces that make one think of white flowers with light touches of colour on their pure petals. The eyes had no peculiar beauty, beyond that of expression; they looked so simple, so candid, so gravely loving, that no accusing scowl, no light sneer could help melting away before their glance. Joshua Rann gave a long cough, as if he were clearing his throat in order to come to a new understanding with himself; Chad Cranage lifted up his leather skull-cap and scratched his head; and Wiry Ben wondered how Seth had the pluck to think of courting her.

'A sweet woman,' the stranger said to himself, 'but surely nature never meant her for a preacher.'

Perhaps he was one of those who think that nature has theatrical properties, and, with the considerate view of facilitating art and psychology, 'makes up' her characters, so that there may be no mistake about them. But Dinah began to speak.

'Dear friends,' she said, in a clear but not loud voice, 'let us pray for a blessing.'

She closed her eyes, and hanging her head down a little, continued in the same moderate tone, as if speaking to some one quite near her: –

'Saviour of sinners! when a poor woman, laden with sins, went out to the well to draw water, she found Thee sitting at the well.[15] She knew Thee not; she had not sought Thee; her mind was dark; her life was unholy. But Thou didst speak to her, Thou didst teach her, Thou didst show her that her life lay open before Thee, and yet Thou wast ready to give her that blessing which she had never sought. Jesus! Thou art in the midst of us, and Thou knowest all men: if there is any here like that poor woman – if their minds are dark, their lives unholy – if they have come out not seeking Thee, not desiring to be taught; deal with them according to the free mercy which Thou didst show to her. Speak to them, Lord; open their ears to my message; bring their sins to their minds, and make them thirst for that salvation which Thou art ready to give.

'Lord! Thou art with Thy people still: they see Thee in the night-watches, and their hearts burn within them as Thou talkest with them by the way. And Thou art near to those who have not known Thee: open their eyes that they may see Thee – see Thee weeping over them, and saying "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life" — see Thee hanging on the cross and saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" — see Thee as Thou wilt come again in Thy glory to judge them at the last. Amen.'

Dinah opened her eyes again and paused, looking at the group of villagers, who were now gathered rather more closely on her right hand.

'Dear friends,' she began, raising her voice a little, 'you have all of you been to church, and I think you must have heard the clergyman read these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor." Jesus Christ spoke those words — he said he came *to preach the Gospel to the poor:* I don't know whether you ever thought about those words much; but I will tell you when I remember first hearing them. It was on just such a sort of evening as this, when I was a little girl, and my aunt as brought me up, took me to hear a good man preach out of doors, just as we are here. I remember his face well: he was a very old man, and had very long white hair; his voice was very soft and beautiful, not like any voice I had ever heard before. I was a little girl, and scarcely knew anything, and this old man seemed to me such a different sort of a man from anybody I had ever seen before, that I thought he had perhaps come down from the sky to preach to us, and I said, "Aunt, will he go back to the sky to-night, like the picture in the Bible?"

'That man of God was Mr Wesley, who spent his life in doing what our blessed Lord did — preaching the Gospel to the poor — and he entered into his rest eight years ago. I came to know more about him years after, but I was a foolish thoughtless child then, and I remembered only one thing he told us in his sermon. He told us as "Gospel" meant "good news". The Gospel, you know, is what the Bible tells us about God.

'Think of that now! Jesus Christ did really come down from heaven, as I, like a silly child, thought Mr Wesley did; and what he came down for, was to tell good news about God to the poor. Why, you and me, dear friends, are poor. We have been brought up in poor cottages, and have been reared on oat-cake,[16] and lived coarse; and we haven't been to school much, nor read books, and we don't know much about anything but what happens just round us. We are just the sort of people that want to hear good news. For when anybody's well off, they don't much mind about hearing news from distant parts; but if a poor man or woman's in trouble and has hard work to make out a living, they like to have a letter to tell 'em they've got a friend as will help 'em. To be sure, we can't help knowing something about God, even if we've never

heard the Gospel, the good news that our Saviour brought us. For we know everything comes from God: don't you say almost every day, "This and that will happen, please God"; and "We shall begin to cut the grass soon, please God to send us a little more sunshine"? We know very well we are altogether in the hands of God: we didn't bring ourselves into the world, we can't keep ourselves alive while we're sleeping; the daylight, and the wind, and the corn, and the cows to give us milk — everything we have comes from God. And he gave us our souls, and put love between parents and children, and husband and wife. But is that as much as we want to know about God? We see he is great and mighty, and can do what he will: we are lost, as if we was struggling in great waters, when we try to think of him.

'But perhaps doubts come into your mind like this: Can God take much notice of us poor people? Perhaps he only made the world for the great and the wise and the rich. It doesn't cost him much to give us our little handful of victual and bit of clothing; but how do we know he cares for us any more than we care for the worms and things in the garden, so as we rear our carrots and onions? Will God take care of us when we die? and has he any comfort for us when we are lame and sick and helpless? Perhaps, too, he is angry with us; else why does the blight come, and the bad harvests, and the fever, and all sorts of pain and trouble? For our life is full of trouble, and if God sends us good, he seems to send bad too. How is it? how is it?

'Ah! dear friends, we are in sad want of good news about God; and what does other good news signify if we haven't that? For everything else comes to an end, and when we die we leave it all. But God lasts when everything else is gone. What shall we do if he is not our friend?'

Then Dinah told how the good news had been brought, and how the mind of God towards the poor had been made manifest in the life of Jesus, dwelling on its lowliness and its acts of mercy.

'So you see, dear friends,' she went on, 'Jesus spent his time almost all in doing good to poor people; he preached out of doors to them, and he made friends of poor workmen, and taught them and took pains with them. Not but what he did good to the rich too, for he was full of love to all men, only he saw as the poor were more in want of his help. So he cured the lame and the sick and the blind, and he worked miracles, to feed the hungry, because, he said, he was sorry for them; and he was very kind to the little children, and comforted those who had lost their friends: and he spoke very tenderly to poor sinners that were sorry for their sins.

'Ah! wouldn't you love such a man if you saw him — if he was here in this village? What a kind heart he must have! What a friend he would be to go to in trouble! How pleasant it must be to be taught by him.

'Well, dear friends, who *was* this man? Was he only a good man — a very good man, and no more — like our dear Mr Wesley, who has been taken from us?… He was the son of God — "in the image of the Father", the Bible says; that means, just like God, who is the beginning and end of all things — the God we want to know about. So then, all the love that Jesus showed to the poor is the same love that God has for us. We can understand what Jesus felt, because he came in a body like ours, and spoke words such as we speak to each other. We were afraid to think what God was before — the God who made the world and the sky and the thunder and lightning. We could never see him; we could only see the things he had made; and some of these things was very terrible, so as we might well tremble when we thought of him. But our blessed Saviour has showed us what God is in a way us poor ignorant people can understand; he has showed us what God's heart is, what are his feelings towards us.

'But let us see a little more about what Jesus came on earth for. Another time he said, "I came to seek and to save that which was lost"; and another time, "I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

'The *lost!*… *Sinners!*… Ah! dear friends, does that mean you and me?'

Hitherto the traveller had been chained to the spot against his will by the charm of Dinah's mellow treble tones, which had a variety of modulation like that of a fine instrument touched with the unconscious skill of musical instinct. The simple things she said seemed like novelties, as a melody strikes us with a new feeling when we hear it sung by the pure voice of a boyish chorister; the quiet depth of conviction with which she spoke seemed in itself an evidence for the truth of her message. He saw that she had thoroughly arrested her hearers. The villagers had pressed nearer to her, and there was no longer anything but grave attention on all faces. She spoke slowly, though quite fluently, often pausing after a question, or before any transition of ideas. There was no change of attitude, no gesture; the effect of her speech was produced entirely by the inflections of her voice, and when she came to the question, 'Will God take care of us when we die?' she uttered it in such a tone of plaintive appeal that the tears came into some of the hardest eyes. The stranger had ceased to doubt, as he had done at the first glance, that she could fix the attention of her rougher hearers, but still he wondered whether she could have that power of rousing their more violent emotions, which must surely be a necessary seal of her vocation as a Methodist preacher, until she came to the words, 'Lost! — Sinners!' when there was a great change in her voice and manner. She had made a long pause before the exclamation, and the pause seemed to be filled by agitating thoughts that showed

themselves in her features. Her pale face became paler; the circles under her eyes deepened, as they do when tears half gather without falling; and the mild loving eyes took an expression of appalled pity, as if she had suddenly discerned a destroying angel hovering over the heads of the people. Her voice became deep and muffled, but there was still no gesture. Nothing could be less like the ordinary type of the Ranter[17] than Dinah. She was not preaching as she heard others preach, but speaking directly from her own emotions, and under the inspiration of her own simple faith.

But now she had entered into a new current of feeling. Her manner became less calm, her utterance more rapid and agitated, as she tried to bring home to the people their guilt, their wilful darkness, their state of disobedience to God — as she dwelt on the hatefulness of sin, the Divine holiness, and the sufferings of the Saviour, by which a way had been opened for their salvation. At last it seemed as if, in her yearning desire to reclaim the lost sheep, she could not be satisfied by addressing her hearers as a body. She appealed first to one and then to another, beseeching them with tears to turn to God while there was yet time; painting to them the desolation of their souls, lost in sin, feeding on the husks of this miserable world, far away from God their Father; and then the love of the Saviour, who was waiting and watching for their return.

There was many a responsive sigh and groan from her fellow-Methodists, but the village mind does not easily take fire, and a little smouldering vague anxiety, that might easily die out again, was the utmost effect Dinah's preaching had wrought in them at present. Yet no one had retired, except the children and 'old Feyther Taft', who being too deaf to catch many words, had some time ago gone back to his ingle-nook. Wiry Ben was feeling very uncomfortable, and almost wishing he had not come to hear Dinah; he thought what she said would haunt him somehow. Yet he couldn't help liking to look at her and listen to her, though he dreaded every moment that she would fix her eyes on him, and address him in particular. She had already addressed Sandy Jim, who was now holding the baby to relieve his wife, and the big soft-hearted man had rubbed away some tears with his fist, with a confused intention of being a better fellow, going less to the Holly Bush down by the Stone-pits, and cleaning himself more regularly of a Sunday.

In front of Sandy Jim stood Chad's Bess, who had shown an unwonted quietude and fixity of attention ever since Dinah had begun to speak. Not that the matter of the discourse had arrested her at once, for she was lost in a puzzling speculation as to what pleasure and satisfaction there could be in life to a young woman who wore a cap like Dinah's. Giving up this inquiry in despair, she took to studying Dinah's nose, eyes, mouth, and hair, and wondering whether it was better to have such a sort of pale face as that, or fat red cheeks and round black eyes like her own. But gradually the influence of the general gravity told upon her, and she became conscious of what Dinah was saying. The gentle tones, the loving persuasion, did not touch her, but when the more severe appeals came she began to be frightened. Poor Bessy had always been considered a naughty girl; she was conscious of it; if it was necessary to be very good, it was clear she must be in a bad way. She couldn't find her places at church as Sally Rann could; she had often been tittering when she 'curcheyed'[18] to Mr Irwine; and these religious deficiencies were accompanied by a corresponding slackness in the minor morals, for Bessy belonged unquestionably to that unsoaped, lazy class of feminine characters with whom you may venture to 'eat an egg, an apple, or a nut'.[19] All this she was generally conscious of, and hitherto had not been greatly ashamed of it. But now she began to feel very much as if the constable had come to take her up and carry her before the justice for some undefined offence. She had a terrified sense that God, whom she had always thought of as very far off, was very near to her, and that Jesus was close by looking at her, though she could not see him. For Dinah had that belief in visible manifestations of Jesus,[20] which is common among the Methodists, and she communicated it irresistibly to her hearers: she made them feel that he was among them bodily, and might at any moment show himself to them in some way that would strike anguish and penitence into their hearts.

'See!' she exclaimed, turning to the left, with her eyes fixed on a point above the heads of the people — 'see where our blessed Lord stands and weeps, and stretches out his arms towards you. Hear what he says: "How often would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!"… and ye would not,' she repeated, in a tone of pleading reproach, turning her eyes on the people again. 'See the print of the nails on his dear hands and feet. It is your sins that made them! Ah! how pale and worn he looks! He has gone through all that great agony in the garden, when his soul was exceeding sorrowful even unto death, and the great drops of sweat fell like blood to the ground. They spat upon him and buffeted him, they scourged him, they mocked him, they laid the heavy cross on his bruised shoulders. Then they nailed him up. Ah! what pain! His lips are parched with thirst, and they mock him still in this great agony; yet with those parched lips he prays for them, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Then a horror of great darkness fell upon him, and he felt what sinners feel when they are for ever shut out from God. That was the last drop in the cup of bitterness. "My God, my God!" he cries, "why hast Thou forsaken me?"

'All this he bore for you! For you — and you never think of him; for you — and you turn your backs on

him; you don't care what he has gone through for you. Yet he is not weary of toiling for you: he has risen from the dead, he is praying for you at the right hand of God — "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And he is upon this earth too; he is among us; he is there close to you now; I see his wounded body and his look of love.'

Here Dinah turned to Bessy Cranage, whose bonny youth and evident vanity had touched her with pity.

'Poor child! poor child! He is beseeching you, and you don't listen to him. You think of earrings and fine gowns and caps, and you never think of the Saviour who died to save your precious soul. Your cheeks will be shrivelled one day, your hair will be grey, your poor body will be thin and tottering! Then you will begin to feel that your soul is not saved; then you will have to stand before God dressed in your sins, in your evil tempers and vain thoughts. And Jesus, who stands ready to help you now, won't help you then: because you won't have him to be your Saviour, he will be your judge. Now he looks at you with love and mercy, and says, "Come to me that you may have life"; then he will turn away from you, and say, "Depart from me into everlasting fire!"'

Poor Bessy's wide-open black eyes began to fill with tears, her great red cheeks and lips became quite pale, and her face was distorted like a little child's before a burst of crying.

'Ah! poor blind child!' Dinah went on, 'think if it should happen to you as it once happened to a servant of God in the days of her vanity. *She* thought of her lace caps, and saved all her money to buy 'em; she thought nothing about how she might get a clean heart and a right spirit, she only wanted to have better lace than other girls. And one day when she put her new cap on and looked in the glass, she saw a bleeding Face crowned with thorns. That face is looking at you now,' — here Dinah pointed to a spot close in front of Bessy. — 'Ah! tear off those follies! cast them away from you, as if they were stinging adders. They *are* stinging you — they are poisoning your soul – they are dragging you down into a dark bottomless pit, where you will sink for ever, and for ever, and for ever, further away from light and God.'

Bessy could bear it no longer: a great terror was upon her, and wrenching her earrings from her ears, she threw them down before her, sobbing aloud. Her father, Chad, frightened lest he should be 'laid hold on' too, this impression on the rebellious Bess striking him as nothing less than a miracle, walked hastily away, and began to work at his anvil by way of reassuring himself. 'Folks mun ha' hoss-shoes, praichin' or no praichin': the divil canna lay hould o' me for that,' he muttered to himself.

But now Dinah began to tell of the joys that were in store for the penitent, and to describe in her simple way the divine peace and love with which the soul of the believer is filled — how the sense of God's love turns poverty into riches, and satisfies the soul, so that no uneasy desire vexes it, no fear alarms it: how, at last, the very temptation to sin is extinguished, and heaven is begun upon earth, because no cloud passes between the soul and God, who is its eternal sun.

'Dear friends,' she said at last, 'brothers and sisters, whom I love as those for whom my Lord has died, believe me, I know what this great blessedness is; and because I know it, I want you to have it too. I am poor, like you: I have to get my living with my hands; but no lord nor lady can be so happy as me, if they haven't got the love of God in their souls. Think what it is – not to hate anything but sin; to be full of love to every creature; to be frightened at nothing; to be sure that all things will turn to good; not to mind pain, because it is our Father's will; to know that nothing – no, not if the earth was to be burnt up, or the waters come and drown us – nothing could part us from God who loves us, and who fills our souls with peace and joy, because we are sure that whatever he wills is holy, just, and good.

'Dear friends, come and take this blessedness; it is offered to you; it is the good news that Jesus came to preach to the poor. It is not like the riches of this world, so that the more one gets the less the rest can have. God is without end; his love is without end –

> "Its streams the whole creation reach,
> So plenteous is the store;
> Enough for all, enough for each,
> Enough for evermore."'[21]

Dinah had been speaking at least an hour, and the reddening light of the parting day seemed to give a solemn emphasis to her closing words. The stranger, who had been interested in the course of her sermon, as if it had been the development of a drama — for there is this sort of fascination in all sincere unpremeditated eloquence, which opens to one the inward drama of the speaker's emotions — now turned his horse aside, and pursued his way, while Dinah said, 'Let us sing a little, dear friends'; and as he was still winding down the slope, the voices of the Methodists reached him, rising and falling in that strange blending of exultation and sadness which belongs to the cadence of a hymn.

CHAPTER III

After the Preaching

In less than an hour from that time Seth Bede was walking by Dinah's side along the hedgerow-path that skirted the pastures and green corn-fields which lay between the village and the Hall Farm. Dinah had taken off her little Quaker bonnet again, and was holding it in her hands that she might have a freer enjoyment of the cool evening twilight, and Seth could see the expression of her face quite clearly as he walked by her side, timidly revolving something he wanted to say to her. It was an expression of unconscious placid gravity – of absorption in thoughts that had no connection with the present moment or with her own personality: an expression that is most of all discouraging to a lover. Her very walk was discouraging: it had that quiet elasticity that asks for no support. Seth felt this dimly; he said to himself, 'She's too good and holy for any man, let alone me', and the words he had been summoning rushed back again before they had reached his lips. But another thought gave him courage: 'There's no man could love her better, and leave her freer to follow the Lord's work.' They had been silent for many minutes now, since they had done talking about Bessy Cranage; Dinah seemed almost to have forgotten Seth's presence, and her pace was becoming so much quicker, that the sense of their being only a few minutes' walk from the yard-gates of the Hall Farm at last gave Seth courage to speak.

'You've quite made up your mind to go back to Snowfield o' Saturday, Dinah?'

'Yes,' said Dinah, quietly. 'I'm called there. It was borne in upon my mind[1] while I was meditating on Sunday night, as sister Allen, who's in a decline, is in need of me. I saw her as plain as we see that bit of thin white cloud, lifting up her poor thin hand and beckoning to me. And this morning when I opened the Bible for direction, the first words my eyes fell on were, "And after we had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia."[2] If it wasn't for that clear showing of the Lord's will I should be loth to go, for my heart yearns over my aunt and her little ones, and that poor wandering lamb Hetty Sorrel.[3] I've been much drawn out in prayer for her of late, and I look on it as a token that there may be mercy in store for her.'

'God grant it,' said Seth. 'For I doubt Adam's heart is so set on her, he'll never turn to anybody else; and yet it 'ud go to my heart if he was to marry her, for I canna think as she'd make him happy. It's a deep mystery – the way the heart of man turns to one woman out of all the rest he's seen i' the world, and makes it easier for him to work seven year for *her,* like Jacob did for Rachel; sooner than have any other woman for th' asking. I often think of them words, "And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed to him but a few days for the love he had to her."[4] I know those words 'ud come true with me, Dinah, if so be you'd give me hope as I might win you after seven years was over. I know you think a husband 'ud be taking up too much o' your thoughts, because St Paul says, "She that's married careth for the things of the world how she may please her husband";[5] and may happen you'll think me over-bold to speak to you about it again, after what you told me o' your mind last Saturday. But I've been thinking it over again by night and by day, and I've prayed not to be blinded by my own desires, to think what's only good for me must be good for you too. And it seems to me there's more texts for your marrying than ever you can find against it. For St Paul says as plain as can be in another place, "I will that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully"; and then "two are better than one"; and that holds good with marriage as well as with other things. For we should be o' one heart and o' one mind, Dinah. We both serve the same Master, and are striving after the same gifts; and I'd never be the husband to make a claim on you as could interfere with your doing the work God has fitted you for. I'd make a shift, and fend indoor and out, to give you more liberty — more than you can have now, for you've got to get your own living now, and I'm strong enough to work for us both.'

When Seth had once begun to urge his suit, he went on earnestly, and almost hurriedly, lest Dinah should speak some decisive word before he had poured forth all the arguments he had prepared. His cheeks became flushed as he went on, his mild grey eyes filled with tears, and his voice trembled as he spoke the last sentence. They had reached one of those very narrow passes between two tall stones, which performed the office of a stile[6] in Loamshire, and Dinah paused as she turned towards Seth and said, in her tender but calm treble notes –

‘Seth Bede, I thank you for your love towards me, and if I could think of any man as more than a Christian brother, I think it would be you. But my heart is not free to marry. That is good for other women, and it is a great and a blessed thing to be a wife and mother; but “as God has distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every man, so let him walk”.[7] God has called me to minister to others, not to have any joys or sorrows of my own, but to rejoice with them that do rejoice, and to weep with those that weep. He has called me to speak his word, and he has greatly owned my work. It could only be on a very clear showing that I could leave the brethren and sisters at Snowfield, who are favoured with very little of this world’s good; where the trees are few, so that a child might count them, and there’s very hard living for the poor in the winter. It has been given me to help, to comfort, and strengthen the little flock there, and to call in many wanderers; and my soul is filled with these things from my rising up till my lying down. My life is too short, and God’s work is too great for me to think of making a home for myself in this world. I’ve not turned a deaf ear to your words, Seth, for when I saw as your love was given to me, I thought it might be a leading of Providence[8] for me to change my way of life, and that we should be fellow-helpers; and I spread the matter before the Lord. But whenever I tried to fix my mind on marriage, and our living together, other thoughts always came in — the times when I’ve prayed by the sick and dying, and the happy hours I’ve had preaching, when my heart was filled with love, and the Word was given to me abundantly. And when I’ve opened the Bible for direction, I’ve always lighted on some clear word to tell me where my work lay. I believe what you say, Seth, that you would try to be a help and not a hindrance to my work; but I see that our marriage is not God’s will — He draws my heart another way. I desire to live and die without husband or children. I seem to have no room in my soul for wants and fears of my own, it has pleased God to fill my heart so full with the wants and sufferings of his poor people.’

Seth was unable to reply, and they walked on in silence. At last, as they were nearly at the yard-gate, he said –

‘Well, Dinah, I must seek for strength to bear it, and to endure as seeing Him who is invisible. But I feel now how weak my faith is. It seems as if, when you are gone, I could never joy in anything any more. I think it’s something passing the love of women[9] as I feel for you, for I could be content without your marrying me if I could go and live at Snowfield, and be near you. I trusted as the strong love God had given me towards you was a leading for us both; but it seems it was only meant for my trial. Perhaps I feel more for you than I ought to feel for any creature, for I often can’t help saying of you what the hymn says –

> “In darkest shades if she appear,
> My dawning is begun;
> She is my soul’s bright morning-star,
> And she my rising sun.”[10]

That may be wrong, and I am to be taught better. But you wouldn’t be displeased with me if things turned out so as I could leave this country and go to live at Snowfield?’

‘No, Seth; but I counsel you to wait patiently, and not lightly to leave your own country and kindred. Do nothing without the Lord’s clear bidding. It’s a bleak and barren country there, not like this land of Goshen[11] you’ve been used to. We mustn’t be in a hurry to fix and choose our own lot; we must wait to be guided.’

‘But you’d let me write you a letter, Dinah, if there was anything I wanted to tell you?’

‘Yes, sure; let me know if you’re in any trouble. You’ll be continually in my prayers.’

They had now reached the yard-gate, and Seth said, ‘I won’t go in, Dinah; so farewell.’ He paused and hesitated after she had given him her hand, and then said, ‘There’s no knowing but what you may see things different after a while. There may be a new leading.’

‘Let us leave that, Seth. It’s good to live only a moment at a time, as I’ve read in one of Mr Wesley’s books. It isn’t for you and me to lay plans; we’ve nothing to do but to obey and to trust. Farewell.’

Dinah pressed his hand with rather a sad look in her loving eyes and then passed through the gate, while Seth turned away to walk lingeringly home. But instead of taking the direct road, he chose to turn back along the fields through which he and Dinah had already passed; and I think his blue linen handkerchief was very wet with tears long before he had made up his mind that it was time for him to set his face steadily homewards. He was but three-and-twenty, and had only just learned what it is to love — to love with that adoration which a young man gives to a woman whom he feels to be greater and better than himself. Love of this sort is hardly distinguishable from religious feeling. What deep and worthy love is so? whether of woman or child, or art or music. Our caresses, our tender words, our still rapture under the influence of autumn sunsets, or pillared vistas, or calm majestic statues, or Beethoven symphonies, all bring with them the consciousness that they are mere waves and ripples in an unfathomable ocean of love and

beauty; our emotion in its keenest moment passes from expression into silence, our love at its highest flood rushes beyond its object, and loses itself in the sense of divine mystery. And this blessed gift of venerating love has been given to too many humble craftsmen since the world began, for us to feel any surprise that it should have existed in the soul of a Methodist carpenter half a century ago, while there was yet a lingering after-glow from the time when Wesley and his fellow-labourer fed on the hips and haws of the Cornwall hedges, after exhausting limbs and lungs in carrying a divine message to the poor.

That after-glow has long faded away; and the picture we are apt to make of Methodism in our imagination is not an amphitheatre of green hills, or the deep shade of broad-leaved sycamores, where a crowd of rough men and weary-hearted women drank in a faith which was a rudimentary culture, which linked their thoughts with the past, lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives, and suffused their souls with the sense of a pitying, loving, infinite Presence, sweet as summer to the houseless needy. It is too possible that to some of my readers Methodism may mean nothing more than low-pitched gables up dingy streets, sleek grocers, sponging preachers, and hypocritical jargon — elements which are regarded as an exhaustive analysis of Methodism in many fashionable quarters.

That would be a pity; for I cannot pretend that Seth and Dinah were anything else than Methodists — not indeed of that modern type which reads quarterly reviews and attends in chapels with pillared porticoes; but of a very old-fashioned kind. They believed in present miracles, in instantaneous conversions, in revelations by dreams and visions; they drew lots, and sought for Divine guidance by opening the Bible at hazard; having a literal way of interpreting the Scriptures, which is not at all sanctioned by approved commentators; and it is impossible for me to represent their diction as correct, or their instruction as liberal. Still — if I have read religious history aright — faith, hope, and charity have not always been found in a direct ratio with a sensibility to the three concords;[12] and it is possible, thank Heaven! to have very erroneous theories and very sublime feelings. The raw bacon which clumsy Molly spares from her own scanty store, that she may carry it to her neighbour's child to 'stop the fits', may be a piteously inefficacious remedy; but the generous stirring of neighbourly kindness that prompted the deed has a beneficent radiation that is not lost.

Considering these things, we can hardly think Dinah and Seth beneath our sympathy, accustomed as we may be to weep over the loftier sorrows of heroines in satin boots and crinoline, and of heroes riding fiery horses, themselves ridden by still more fiery passions.[13]

Poor Seth! he was never on horseback in his life except once, when he was a little lad, and Mr Jonathan Bürge took him up behind, telling him to 'hold on tight'; and instead of bursting out into wild accusing apostrophes to God and destiny, he is resolving, as he now walks homeward under the solemn starlight, to repress his sadness, to be less bent on having his own will, and to live more for others, as Dinah does.

CHAPTER IV

Home and its Sorrows

A green valley with a brook running through it, full almost to overflowing with the late rains; overhung by low stooping willows. Across this brook a plank is thrown, and over this plank Adam Bede is passing with his undoubting step, followed close by Gyp with the basket; evidently making his way to the thatched house, with a stack of timber by the side of it, about twenty yards up the opposite slope.

The door of the house is open, and an elderly woman is looking out; but she is not placidly contemplating the evening sunshine; she has been watching with dim eyes the gradually enlarging speck which for the last few minutes she has been quite sure is her darling son Adam. Lisbeth Bede loves her son with the love of a woman to whom her first-born has come late in life. She is an anxious, spare, yet vigorous old woman, clean as a snowdrop. Her grey hair is turned neatly back under a pure linen cap with a black band round it; her broad chest is covered with a buff neckerchief, and below this you see a sort of short bed-gown made of blue-checkered linen, tied round the waist and descending to the hips, from whence there is a considerable length of linsey-wolsey[1] petticoat. For Lisbeth is tall, and in other points too there is a strong likeness between her and her son Adam. Her dark eyes are somewhat dim now — perhaps from too much crying — but her broadly-marked eyebrows are still black, her teeth are sound, and as she stands knitting rapidly and unconsciously with her work-hardened hands, she has as firmly-upright an attitude as when she is carrying a pail of water on her head from the spring. There is the same type of frame and the same keen activity of temperament in mother and son, but it was not from her that Adam got his well-filled brow and his expression of large-hearted intelligence.

Family likeness has often a deep sadness in it. Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning and repulsion; and ties us by our heart-strings to the beings that jar us at every movement. We hear a voice with the very cadence of our own uttering the thoughts we despise; we see eyes — ah! so like our mother's — averted from us in cold alienation; and our last darling child startles us with the air and gestures of the sister we parted from in bitterness long years ago. The father to whom we owe our best heritage — the mechanical instinct, the keen sensibility to harmony, the unconscious skill of the modelling hand — galls us, and puts us to shame by his daily errors; the long-lost mother, whose face we begin to see in the glass as our own wrinkles come, once fretted our young souls with her anxious humours and irrational persistence.

It is such a fond anxious mother's voice that you hear, as Lisbeth says –

'Well, my lad, it's gone seven by th' clock. Thee't allays stay till the last child's born.[2] Thee wants thy supper, I'll warrand. Where's Seth? gone arter some o's chapellin',[3]1 reckon?'

'Ay, ay, Seth's at no harm, mother, thee mayst be sure. But where's father?' said Adam quickly, as he entered the house and glanced into the room on the left hand, which was used as a workshop. 'Hasn't he done the coffin for Tholer? There's the stuff standing just as I left it this morning.'

'Done the coffin?' said Lisbeth, following him, and knitting uninterruptedly, though she looked at her son very anxiously. 'Eh, my lad, he went off to Treddles' on this forenoon, an's niver come back. I doubt he's got to th' "Waggin Overthrow" again.'

A deep flush of anger passed rapidly over Adam's face. He said nothing, but threw off his jacket, and began to roll up his shirt-sleeves again.

'What art goin' to do, Adam?' said the mother, with a tone and look of alarm. 'Thee wouldstna go to work again, wi'out ha'in thy bit o' supper?'

Adam, too angry to speak, walked into the workshop. But his mother threw down her knitting, and, hurrying after him, took hold of his arm, and said in a tone of plaintive remonstrance –

'Nay, my lad, my lad, thee munna go wi'out thy supper; there's the taters wi' the gravy in 'em, just as thee lik'st 'em. I saved 'em o' purpose for thee. Come an' ha' thy supper, come.'

'Let be!' said Adam impetuously, shaking her off, and seizing one of the planks that stood against the wall. 'It's fine talking about having supper when here's a coffin promised to be ready at Brox'on by seven o'clock to-morrow morning, and ought to ha' been there now, and not a nail struck yet. My throat's too full to swallow victuals.'

‘Why, thee canstna get the coffin ready,’ said Lisbeth. ‘Thee’t work thyself to death. It ’ud take thee all night to do’t.’

‘What signifies how long it takes me? isn’t the coffin promised? Can they bury the man without a coffin? I’d work my right hand off sooner than deceive people with lies i’ that way. It makes me mad to think on’t. I shall overrun these doings before long. I’ve stood enough of ’em.’

Poor Lisbeth did not hear this threat for the first time, and if she had been wise she would have gone away quietly, and said nothing for the next hour. But one of the lessons a woman most rarely learns, is never to talk to an angry or a drunken man. Lisbeth sat down on the chopping bench and began to cry, and by the time she had cried enough to make her voice very piteous, she burst out into words.

‘Nay, my lad, my lad, thee wouldstna go away an’ break thy mother’s heart, an’ leave thy feyther to ruin. Thee wouldstna ha’ ’em carry me to th’ churchyard, an’ thee not to follow me. I shanna rest i’ my grave if I donna see thee at th’ last; an’ how’s they to let thee know as I’m a-dyin’, if Thee’t gone a-workin’ i’ distant parts, an’ Seth belike gone arter thee, and thy feyther not able to hold a pen for’s hand shakin’, besides not knowin’ where thee art? Thee mun f orgie thy feyther — thee munna be so bitter again’ him. He war a good feyther to thee afore he took to th’ drink. He’s a clever workman, an’ taught thee thy trade, remember, an’s niver gen me a blow nor so much as an ill word — no, not even in’s drink. Thee wouldstna ha’m go to the workhus[4] — thy own feyther — an’ him as was a fine-growed man an’ handy at everythin’ amost as thee art thysen, five-an’-twenty ’ear ago, when thee wast a baby at the breast.’

Lisbeth’s voice became louder, and choked with sobs: a sort of wail, the most irritating of all sounds where real sorrows are to be borne, and real work to be done. Adam broke in impatiently.

‘Now, mother, don’t cry and talk so. Haven’t I got enough to vex me without that? What’s th’ use o’ telling me things as I only think too much on every day? If I didna think on ’em why should I do as I do, for the sake o’ keeping things together here? But I hate to be talking where it’s no use: I like to keep my breath for doing istead o’ talking.’

‘I know thee dost things as nobody else ’ud do, my lad. But Thee’t allays so hard upo’ thy feyther, Adam. Thee think’st nothing too much to do for Seth: thee snapp’st me up if iver I find faut wi’ th’ lad. But Thee’t so angered wi’ thy feyther, more nor wi’ anybody else.’

‘That’s better than speaking soft, and letting things go the wrong way, I reckon, isn’t it? If I wasn’t sharp with him, he’d sell every bit o’ stuff i’ th’ yard, and spend it on drink. I know there’s a duty to be done by my father, but it isn’t my duty to encourage him in running headlong to ruin. And what has Seth got to do with it? The lad does no harm as I know of. But leave me alone, mother, and let me get on with the work.’

Lisbeth dared not say any more; but she got up and called Gyp, thinking to console herself somewhat for Adam’s refusal of the supper she had spread out in the loving expectation of looking at him while he ate it, by feeding Adam’s dog with extra liberality. But Gyp was watching his master with wrinkled brow and ears erect, puzzled at this unusual course of things; and though he glanced at Lisbeth when she called him, and moved his fore-paws uneasily, well knowing that she was inviting him to supper, he was in a divided state of mind, and remained seated on his haunches, again fixing his eyes anxiously on his master. Adam noticed Gyp’s mental conflict, and though his anger had made him less tender than usual to his mother, it did not prevent him from caring as much as usual for his dog. We are apt to be kinder to the brutes that love us than to the women that love us. Is it because the brutes are dumb?

‘Go, Gyp; go, lad!’ Adam said, in a tone of encouraging command; and Gyp, apparently satisfied that duty and pleasure were one, followed Lisbeth into the house-place.[5]

But no sooner had he licked up his supper than he went back to his master, while Lisbeth sat down alone to cry over her knitting. Women who are never bitter and resentful are often the most querulous; and if Solomon was as wise as he is reputed to be, I feel sure that when he compared a contentious woman to a continual dropping on a very rainy day,[6] he had not a vixen in his eye — a fury with long nails, acrid and selfish. Depend upon it, he meant a good creature, who had no joy but in the happiness of the loved ones whom she contributed to make uncomfortable, putting by all the tid-bits for them, and spending nothing on herself. Such a woman as Lisbeth, for example – at once patient and complaining, self-renouncing and exacting, brooding the livelong day over what happened yesterday, and what is likely to happen to-morrow, and crying very readily both at the good and the evil. But a certain awe mingled itself with her idolatrous love of Adam, and when he said, ‘Leave me alone’, she was always silenced.

So the hours passed, to the loud ticking of the old day-clock[7] and the sound of Adam’s tools. At last he called for a light and a draught of water (beer was a thing only to be drunk on holidays), and Lisbeth ventured to say as she took it in, ‘Thy supper stans ready for thee, when thee lik’st.’

‘Donna thee sit up, mother,’ said Adam, in a gentle tone. He had worked off his anger now, and whenever he wished to be especially kind to his mother, he fell into his strongest native accent and dialect, with

which at other times his speech was less deeply tinged. ‘I’ll see to father when he comes home; maybe he wonna come at all to-night. I shall be easier if Thee’t Γ bed.’

‘Nay, I’ll bide till Seth comes. He wonna be long now, I reckon.’

It was then past nine by the clock, which was always in advance of the day, and before it had struck ten the latch was lifted and Seth entered. He had heard the sound of the tools as he was approaching.

‘Why, mother,’ he said, ‘how is it as father’s working so late?’

‘It’s none o’ thy feyther as is a-workin’ — thee might know that well anoof if thy head warna full o’ chapellin’ — it’s thy brother as does iverything, for there’s niver nobody else i’ th’ way to do nothin’.’

Lisbeth was going on, for she was not at all afraid of Seth, and usually poured into his ears all the querulousness which was repressed by her awe of Adam. Seth had never in his life spoken a harsh word to his mother, and timid people always wreak their peevishness on the gentle. But Seth, with an anxious look, had passed into the workshop and said –

‘Addy, how’s this? What! father’s forgot the coffin?’

‘Ay, lad, th’ old tale; but I shall get it done,’ said Adam, looking up, and casting one of his bright keen glances at his brother. ‘Why, what’s the matter with thee? Thee’t in trouble.’

Seth’s eyes were red, and there was a look of deep depression on his mild face.

‘Yes, Addy, but it’s what must be borne, and can’t be helped. Why, thee’st never been to the school,[8] then?’

‘School? no; that screw can wait,’ said Adam, hammering away again.

‘Let me take my turn now, and do thee go to bed,’ said Seth.

‘No, lad, I’d rather go on, now I’m in harness. Thee’t help me to carry it to Brox’on when it’s done. I’ll call thee up at sunrise. Go and eat thy supper, and shut the door, so as I mayn’t hear mother’s talk.’

Seth knew that Adam always meant what he said, and was not to be persuaded into meaning anything else. So he turned, with rather a heavy heart, into the house-place.

‘Adam’s niver touched a bit o’ victual sin’ home he’s come,’ said Lisbeth. ‘I reckon thee’st hed thy supper at some o’ thy Methody folks.’

‘Nay, mother,’ said Seth, ‘I’ve had no supper yet.’

‘Come, then,’ said Lisbeth, ‘but donna thee ate the taters, for Adam ’ull happen ate ’em if I leave ’em stannin’. He loves a bit o’ taters an’ gravy. But he’s been so sore an’ angered, he wouldn’t ate ’em, for all I’d putten ’em by o’ purpose for him. An’ he’s been a-threatenin’ to go away again,’ she went on, whimpering, ‘an’ I’m fast sure he’ll go some dawnin’ afore I’m up, an’ niver let me know aforehand, an’ he’ll niver come back again when once he’s gone. An’ I’d better niver ha’ had a son, as is like no other body’s son for the deftness an’ th’ handiness, an’ so looked on by th’ grit folks, an’ tall an’ upright like a poplar-tree, an’ me to be parted from him, an’ niver see ’m no more.’

‘Come, mother, donna grieve thyself in vain,’ said Seth, in a soothing voice. ‘Thee’st not half so good reason to think as Adam ’ull go away as to think he’ll stay with thee. He may say such a thing when he’s in wrath — and he’s got excuse for being wrathful sometimes — but his heart ’ud never let him go. Think how he’s stood by us all when it’s been none so easy — paying his savings to free me from going for a soldier,[9] an’ turnin’ his earnins into wood for father, when he’s got plenty o’ uses for his money, and many a young man like him ’ud ha’ been married and settled before now. He’ll never turn round and knock down his own work, and forsake them as it’s been the labour of his life to stand by.’

‘Donna talk to me about’s marr’in’,’ said Lisbeth, crying afresh. ‘He’s set’s heart on that Hetty Sorrel, as ’ull niver save a penny, an’ ’ull toss up her head at’s old mother. An’ to think as he might ha’ Mary Bürge, an’ be took partners, an’ be a big man wi’ workmen under him, like Mester Bürge — Dolly’s told me so o’er an’ o’er again — if it warna as he’s set’s heart on that bit of a wench, as is o’ no more use nor the gillyflower on the wall. An’ he so wise at bookin’ an’ figurin’, an’ not to know no better nor that!’

‘But, mother, thee know’st we canna love just where other folks ’ud have us. There’s nobody but God can control the heart of man. I could ha’ wished myself as Adam could ha’ made another choice, but I wouldn’t reproach him for what he can’t help. And I’m not sure but what he tries to o’ercome it. But it’s a matter as he doesn’t like to be spoke to about, and I can only pray to the Lord to bless and direct him.’

‘Ay, Thee’t allays ready enough at prayin’, but I donna see as thee gets much wi’ thy prayin’. Thee wotna get double earnins o’ this side Yule. Th’ Methodies ’11 niver make thee half the man thy brother is, for all they’re a-makin’ a preacher on thee.’

‘It’s partly truth thee speak’st there, mother,’ said Seth, mildly; ‘Adam’s far before me, an’s done more for me than I can ever do for him. God distributes talents to every man according as He sees good. But thee mustna undervally prayer. Prayer mayna bring money, but it brings us what no money can buy — a power to keep from sin, and be content with God’s will, whatever He may please to send. If thee wouldst pray to

God to help thee, and trust in His goodness, thee wouldstna be so uneasy about things.'

'Unaisy? I'm i' th' right on't to be unaisy. It's well seen on *thee* what it is niver to be unaisy. Thee't gi' away all thy earnins, an' niver be unaisy as thee'st nothin' laid up again' a rainy day. If Adam had been as aisy as thee, he'd niver ha' had no money to pay for thee. Take no thought for the morrow[10] — take no thought — that's what Thee't allays sayin'; an' what comes on't? Why, as Adam has to take thought for thee.'

'Those are the words o' the Bible, mother,' said Seth. 'They don't mean as we should be idle. They mean we shouldn't be over anxious and worreting ourselves about what'll happen tomorrow, but do our duty, and leave the rest to God's will.'

'Ay, ay, that's the way wi' thee: thee allays makes a peck o' thy own words out o' a pint o' the Bible's.[11] I donna see how Thee't to know as "take no thought for the morrow" means all that. An' when the Bible's such a big book, an' thee canst read all thro't, an' ha' the pick o' the texes, I canna think why thee dostna pick better words as donna mean so much more nor they say. Adam doesna pick a that'n; I can understan' the tex as he's allays a-sayin', "God helps them as helps theirsens."'[12]

'Nay, mother,' said Seth, 'that's no text o' the Bible. It comes out of a book as Adam picked up at the stall at Treddles'on. It was wrote by a knowing man, but over-worldly, I doubt. However, that saying's partly true; for the Bible tells us we must be workers together with God.'

'Well, how'm I to know? It sounds like a tex. But what's th' matter wi' th' lad? Thee't hardly atin' a bit o' supper. Dostna mean to ha' no more nor that bit o' oat-cake? An' thee lookst as white as a flick[13] o' new bacon. What's th' matter wi' thee?'

'Nothing to mind about, mother; I'm not hungry. I'll just look in at Adam again, and see if he'll let me go on with the coffin.'

'Ha' a drop o' warm broth?' said Lisbeth, whose motherly feeling now got the better of her 'nattering' habit. 'I'll set two-three sticks a-light in a minute.'

'Nay, mother, thank thee; Thee't very good,' said Seth, gratefully; and encouraged by this touch of tenderness, he went on: 'Let me pray a bit with thee for father, and Adam, and all of us — it'll comfort thee, happen, more than thee thinkst.'

'Well, I've nothin' to say again' it.'

Lisbeth, though disposed always to take the negative side in her conversations with Seth, had a vague sense that there was some comfort and safety in the fact of his piety, and that it somehow relieved her from the trouble of any spiritual transactions on her own behalf.

So the mother and son knelt down together, and Seth prayed for the poor wandering father, and for those who were sorrowing for him at home. And when he came to the petition that Adam might never be called to set up his tent in a far country, but that his mother might be cheered and comforted by his presence all the days of her pilgrimage,[14] Lisbeth's ready tears flowed again, and she wept aloud.

When they rose from their knees, Seth went to Adam again, and said, 'Wilt only lie down for an hour or two, and let me go on the while?'

'No, Seth, no. Make mother go to bed, and go thyself.'

Meantime Lisbeth had dried her eyes, and now followed Seth, holding something in her hands. It was the brown-and-yellow platter containing the baked potatoes with the gravy in them and bits of meat which she had cut and mixed among them. Those were dear times,[15] when wheaten bread and fresh meat were delicacies to working people. She set the dish down rather timidly on the bench by Adam's side, and said, 'Thee canst pick a bit while Thee't workin'. I'll bring thee another drop o' water.'

'Ay, mother, do,' said Adam, kindly; 'I'm getting very thirsty.'

In half an hour all was quiet; no sound was to be heard in the house but the loud ticking of the old day-clock, and the ringing of Adam's tools. The night was very still: when Adam opened the door to look out at twelve o'clock, the only motion seemed to be in the glowing, twinkling stars: every blade of grass was asleep.

Bodily haste and exertion usually leave our thoughts very much at the mercy of our feelings and imagination; and it was so to-night with Adam. While his muscles were working lustily, his mind seemed as passive as a spectator at a diorama:[16] scenes of the sad past, and probably sad future, floating before him, and giving place one to the other in swift succession.

He saw how it would be to-morrow morning, when he had carried the coffin to Broxton and was at home again, having his breakfast: his father perhaps would come in ashamed to meet his son's glance — would sit down, looking older and more tottering than he had done the morning before, and hang down his head, examining the floor-quarries; while Lisbeth would ask him how he supposed the coffin had been got ready, that he had slinked off and left undone — for Lisbeth was always the first to utter the word of reproach,

although she cried at Adam's severity towards his father.

'So it will go on, worsening and worsening,' thought Adam; 'there's no slipping up-hill again, and no standing still when once you've begun to slip down.' And then the day came back to him when he was a little fellow and used to run by his father's side, proud to be taken out to work, and prouder still to hear his father boasting to his fellow-workmen how 'the little chap had an uncommon notion o' carpentering'. What a fine active fellow his father was then! When people asked Adam whose little lad he was, he had a sense of distinction as he answered, 'I'm Thias Bede's lad' — he was quite sure everybody knew Thias Bede: didn't he make the wonderful pigeon-house at Broxton parsonage?[17] Those were happy days, especially when Seth, who was three years the younger, began to go out working too, and Adam began to be a teacher as well as a learner. But then came the days of sadness, when Adam was someway on in his teens, and Thias began to loiter at the public-houses, and Lisbeth began to cry at home, and to pour forth her plaints in the hearing of her sons. Adam remembered well the night of shame and anguish when he first saw his father quite wild and foolish, shouting a song out fitfully among his drunken companions at the 'Waggon Overthrown'. He had run away once when he was only eighteen, making his escape in the morning twilight with a little blue bundle over his shoulder, and his 'mensuration book'[18] in his pocket, and saying to himself very decidedly that he could bear the vexations of home no longer — he would go and seek his fortune, setting up his stick at the crossways and bending his steps the way it fell. But by the time he got to Stoniton, the thought of his mother and Seth, left behind to endure everything without him, became too importunate, and his resolution failed him. He came back the next day, but the misery and terror his mother had gone through in those two days had haunted her ever since.

'No!' Adam said to himself to-night, 'that must never happen again. It'ud make a poor balance when my doings are cast up at the last, if my poor old mother stood o' the wrong side. My back's broad enough and strong enough; I should be no better than a coward to go away and leave the troubles to be borne by them as aren't half so able. "They that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of those that are weak, and not to please themselves."[19] There's a text wants no candle to show't; it shines by its own light. It's plain enough you get into the wrong road i' this life if you run after this and that only for the sake o' making things easy and pleasant to yourself. A pig may poke his nose into the trough and think o' nothing outside it; but if you've got a man's heart and soul in you, you can't be easy a-making your own bed an' leaving the rest to lie on the stones. Nay, nay, I'll never slip my neck out o' the yoke, and leave the load to be drawn by the weak uns. Father's a sore cross to me, an's likely to be for many a long year to come. What then? I've got th' health, and the limbs, and the sperrit to bear it.'

At this moment a smart rap, as if with a willow wand, was given at the house door, and Gyp, instead of barking, as might have been expected, gave a loud howl. Adam, very much startled, went at once to the door and opened it. Nothing was there; all was still, as when he opened it an hour before; the leaves were motionless, and the light of the stars showed the placid fields on both sides of the brook quite empty of visible life. Adam walked round the house, and still saw nothing except a rat which darted into the woodshed as he passed. He went in again, wondering; the sound was so peculiar, that the moment he heard it, it called up the image of the willow wand striking the door. He could not help a little shudder, as he remembered how often his mother had told him of just such a sound coming as a sign when some one was dying. Adam was not a man to be gratuitously superstitious; but he had the blood of the peasant in him as well as of the artisan, and a peasant can no more help believing in a traditional superstition than a horse can help trembling when he sees a camel. Besides, he had that mental combination which is at once humble in the region of mystery, and keen in the region of knowledge: it was the depth of his reverence quite as much as his hard common-sense, which gave him his disinclination to doctrinal religion, and he often checked Seth's argumentative spiritualism by saying, 'Eh, it's a big mystery; thee know'st but little about it.' And so it happened that Adam was at once penetrating and credulous. If a new building had fallen down and he had been told that this was a divine judgment, he would have said, 'May be; but the bearing o' the roof and walls wasn't right, else it wouldn't ha' come down'; yet he believed in dreams and prognostics, and to his dying day he bated his breath a little when he told the story of the stroke with the willow wand.[20] I tell it as he told it, not attempting to reduce it to its natural elements: in our eagerness to explain impressions, we often lose our hold of the sympathy that comprehends them.

But he had the best antidote against imaginative dread in the necessity for getting on with the coffin, and for the next ten minutes his hammer was ringing so uninterruptedly, that other sounds, if there were any, might well be overpowered. A pause came, however, when he had to take up his ruler, and now again came the strange rap, and again Gyp howled. Adam was at the door without the loss of a moment; but again all was still, and the starlight showed there was nothing but the dew-laden grass in front of the cottage.

Adam for a moment thought uncomfortably about his father; but of late years he had never come home at dark hours from Treddleston, and there was every reason for believing that he was then sleeping off his

drunkenness at the ‘Waggon Overthrown’. Besides, to Adam, the conception of the future was so inseparable from the painful image of his father, that the fear of any fatal accident to him was excluded by the deeply-infixed fear of his continual degradation. The next thought that occurred to him was one that made him slip off his shoes and tread lightly up-stairs, to listen at the bedroom doors. But both Seth and his mother were breathing regularly.

Adam came down and set to work again, saying to himself, ‘I won’t open the door again. It’s no use staring about to catch sight of a sound. Maybe there’s a world about us as we can’t see, but th’ ear’s quicker than the eye, and catches a sound from’t now and then. Some people think they get a sight on’t too, but they’re mostly folks whose eyes are not much use to ’em at anything else. For my part, I think it’s better to see when your perpendicular’s true, than to see a ghost.’

Such thoughts as these are apt to grow stronger and stronger as daylight quenches the candles and the birds begin to sing. By the time the red sunlight shone on the brass nails that formed the initials on the lid of the coffin, any lingering foreboding from the sound of the willow wand was merged in satisfaction that the work was done and the promise redeemed. There was no need to call Seth, for he was already moving overhead, and presently came down-stairs.

‘Now, lad,’ said Adam, as Seth made his appearance, ‘the coffin’s done, and we can take it over to Brox’on, and be back again before half after six. I’ll take a mouthful o’ oat-cake, and then we’ll be off.’

The coffin was soon propped on the tall shoulders of the two brothers, and they were making their way, followed close by Gyp, out of the little woodyard into the lane at the back of the house. It was but about a mile and a half to Broxton over the opposite slope, and their road wound very pleasantly along lanes and across fields, where the pale woodbines and the dog-roses were scenting the hedgerows, and the birds were twittering and trilling in the tall leafy boughs of oak and elm. It was a strangely-mingled picture — the fresh youth of the summer morning, with its Eden-like peace and loveliness, the stalwart strength of the two brothers in their rusty working clothes, and the long coffin on their shoulders. They paused for the last time before a small farmhouse outside the village of Broxton. By six o’clock the task was done, the coffin nailed down, and Adam and Seth were on their way home. They chose a shorter way homeward, which would take them across the fields and the brook in front of the house. Adam had not mentioned to Seth what had happened in the night, but he still retained sufficient impression from it himself to say –

‘Seth, lad, if father isn’t come home by the time we’ve had our breakfast, I think it’ll be as well for thee to go over to Treddles’on and look after him, and thee canst get me the brass wire I want. Never mind about losing an hour at thy work; we can make that up. What dost say?’

‘I’m willing,’ said Seth. ‘But see what clouds have gathered since we set out. I’m thinking we shall have more rain. It’ll be a sore time for th’ haymaking if the meadows are flooded again. The brook’s fine and full now: another day’s rain ’ud cover the plank, and we should have to go round by the road.’

They were coming across the valley now, and had entered the pasture through which the brook ran.

‘Why, what’s that sticking against the willow?’ continued Seth, beginning to walk faster. Adam’s heart rose to his mouth: the vague anxiety about his father was changed into a great dread. He made no answer to Seth, but ran forward, preceded by Gyp, who began to bark uneasily; and in two moments he was at the bridge.

This was what the omen meant, then! And the grey-haired father, of whom he had thought with a sort of hardness a few hours ago, as certain to live to be a thorn in his side, was perhaps even then struggling with that watery death! This was the first thought that flashed through Adam’s conscience, before he had time to seize the coat and drag out the tall heavy body. Seth was already by his side, helping him, and when they had it on the bank, the two sons in the first moments knelt and looked with mute awe at the glazed eyes, forgetting that there was need for action — forgetting everything but that their father lay dead before them. Adam was the first to speak.

‘I’ll run to mother,’ he said, in a loud whisper. ‘I’ll be back to thee in a minute.’

Poor Lisbeth was busy preparing her sons’ breakfast, and their porridge was already steaming on the fire. Her kitchen always looked the pink of cleanliness, but this morning she was more than usually bent on making her hearth and breakfast-table look comfortable and inviting.

‘The lads ’ull be fine an’ hungry,’ she said, half aloud, as she stirred the porridge. ‘It’s a good step to Brox’on, an’ it’s hungry air o’er the hill — wi’ that heavy coffin too. Eh! it’s heavier now, wi’ poor Bob Tholer in’t. Howiver, I’ve made a drap more porridge nor common this mornin’. The feyther ’ull happen come in arter a bit. Not as he’ll ate much porridge. He swallers sixpenn’orth o’ ale, an’ saves a hap’orth o’porridge — that’s his way o’ layin’ by money, as I’ve told him many a time, an’ am likely to tell him again afore the day’s out. Eh! poor mon, he takes it quiet enough; there’s no denyin’ that.’

But now Lisbeth heard the heavy ‘thud’ of a running footstep on the turf, and, turning quickly towards

the door, she saw Adam enter, looking so pale and overwhelmed that she screamed aloud and rushed towards him before he had time to speak.

'Hush, mother,' Adam said, rather hoarsely, 'don't be frightened. Father's tumbled into the water. Belike we may bring him round again. Seth and me are going to carry him in. Get a blanket and make it hot at the fire.'

In reality Adam was convinced that his father was dead, but he knew there was no other way of repressing his mother's impetuous wailing grief than by occupying her with some active task which had hope in it.

He ran back to Seth, and the two sons lifted the sad burden in heartstricken silence. The wide-open glazed eyes were grey, like Seth's, and had once looked with mild pride on the boys before whom Thias had lived to hang his head in shame. Seth's chief feeling was awe and distress at this sudden snatching away of his father's soul; but Adam's mind rushed back over the past in a flood of relenting and pity. When death, the great Reconciler, has come, it is never our tenderness that we repent of, but our severity.

CHAPTER V

The Rector

Before twelve o'clock there had been some heavy storms of rain, and the water lay in deep gutters on the sides of the gravel-walks in the garden of Broxton Parsonage; the great Provence roses[1] had been cruelly tossed by the wind and beaten by the rain, and all the delicate-stemmed border flowers had been dashed down and stained with the wet soil. A melancholy morning — because it was nearly time hay-harvest should begin, and instead of that the meadows were likely to be flooded.

But people who have pleasant homes get indoor enjoyments that they would never think of but for the rain. If it had not been a wet morning, Mr Irwine would not have been in the dining-room playing at chess with his mother, and he loves both his mother and chess quite well enough to pass some cloudy hours very easily by their help. Let me take you into that dining-room, and show you the Rev. Adolphus Irwine, Rector of Broxton, Vicar of Hayslope, and Vicar of Blythe, a pluralist at whom the severest Church-reformer[2] would have found it difficult to look sour. We will enter very softly, and stand still in the open doorway, without awaking the glossy brown setter who is stretched across the hearth, with her two puppies beside her; or the pug, who is dosing, with his black muzzle aloft, like a sleepy president.[3]

The room is a large and lofty one, with an ample mullioned oriel window at one end; the walls, you see, are new, and not yet painted;[4] but the furniture, though originally of an expensive sort, is old and scanty, and there is no drapery about the window. The crimson cloth over the large dining-table is very threadbare, though it contrasts pleasantly enough with the dead hue of the plaster on the walls; but on this cloth there is a massive silver waiter[5] with a decanter of water on it, of the same pattern as two larger ones that are propped up on the sideboard with a coat of arms conspicuous[6] in their centre. You suspect at once that the inhabitants of this room have inherited more blood than wealth, and would not be surprised to find that Mr Irwine had a finely-cut nostril and upper lip; but at present we can only see that he has a broad flat back and an abundance of powdered hair,[7] all thrown backward and tied behind with a black ribbon — a bit of conservatism in costume which tells you that he is not a young man. He will perhaps turn round by-and-by, and in the meantime we can look at that stately old lady, his mother, a beautiful aged brunette, whose rich-toned complexion is well set off by the complex wrappings of pure white cambric and lace about her head and neck. She is as erect in her comely embonpoint as a statue of Ceres;[8] and her dark face, with its delicate aquiline nose, firm proud mouth, and small intense black eye, is so keen and sarcastic in its expression that you instinctively substitute a pack of cards for the chess-men, and imagine her telling your fortune. The small brown hand with which she is lifting her queen is laden with pearls, diamonds, and turquoises; and a large black veil is very carefully adjusted over the crown of her cap, and falls in sharp contrast on the white folds about her neck. It must take a long time to dress that old lady in the morning! But it seems a law of nature that she should be dressed so: she is clearly one of those children of royalty who have never doubted their right divine,[9] and never met with any one so absurd as to question it.

'There, Dauphin,[10] tell me what that is!' says this magnificent old lady, as she deposits her queen very quietly and folds her arms. 'I should be sorry to utter a word disagreeable to your feelings.'

'Ah! you witch-mother, you sorceress![11] How is a Christian man to win a game off you? I should have sprinkled the board with holy water before we began. You've not won that game by fair means, now, so don't pretend it.'

'Yes, yes, that's what the beaten have always said of great conquerors. But see, there's the sunshine falling on the board, to show you more clearly what a foolish move you made with that pawn. Come, shall I give you another chance?'

'No, mother, I shall leave you to your own conscience, now it's clearing up. We must go and plash up the mud a little, mustn't we, Juno?'[12] This was addressed to the brown setter, who had jumped up at the sound of the voices and laid her nose in an insinuating way on her master's leg. 'But I must go up-stairs first and see Anne. I was called away to Tholer's funeral just when I was going before.'

'It's of no use, child; she can't speak to you. Kate says she has one of her worst headaches this morning.'

'Oh, she likes me to go and see her just the same; she's never too ill to care about that.'

If you know how much of human speech is mere purposeless impulse or habit, you will not wonder when

I tell you that this identical objection had been made, and had received the same kind of answer, many hundred times in the course of the fifteen years that Mr Irwine's sister Anne had been an invalid. Splendid old ladies, who take a long time to dress in the morning, have often slight sympathy with sickly daughters.

But while Mr Irwine was still seated, leaning back in his chair and stroking Juno's head, the servant came to the door and said, 'If you please, sir, Joshua Rann wishes to speak with you, if you're at liberty.'

'Let him be shown in here,' said Mrs Irwine, taking up her knitting. 'I always like to hear what Mr Rann has got to say. His shoes will be dirty, but see that he wipes them, Carroll.'

In two minutes Mr Rann appeared at the door with very deferential bows, which, however, were far from conciliating Pug, who gave a sharp bark, and ran across the room to reconnoitre the stranger's legs; while the two puppies, regarding Mr Rann's prominent calf and ribbed worsted stockings from a more sensuous point of view, plunged and growled over them in great enjoyment. Meantime, Mr Irwine turned round his chair and said –

'Well, Joshua, anything the matter at Hayslope, that you've come over this damp morning? Sit down, sit down. Never mind the dogs; give them a friendly kick. Here, Pug, you rascal!'

It is very pleasant to see some men turn round; pleasant as a sudden rush of warm air in winter, or the flash of firelight in the chill dusk. Mr Irwine was one of those men. He bore the same sort of resemblance to his mother that our loving memory of a friend's face often bears to the face itself: the lines were all more generous, the smile brighter, the expression heartier. If the outline had been less finely cut, his face might have been called jolly; but that was not the right word for its mixture of bonhommie and distinction.

'Thank your reverence,' answered Mr Rann, endeavouring to look unconcerned about his legs, but shaking them alternately to keep off the puppies; 'I'll stand, if you please, as more becoming. I hope I see you and Mrs Irwine well, an' Miss Irwine — an' Miss Anne, I hope's as well as usual.'

'Yes, Joshua, thank you. You see how blooming my mother looks. She beats us younger people hollow. But what's the matter?'

'Why, sir, I had to come to Brox'on to deliver some work, and I thought it but right to call and let you know the goins-on as there's been i' the village, such as I hanna seen i' my time, and I've lived in it man and boy sixty year come St Thomas, and collected th' Easter dues[13] for Mr Blick before your reverence come into the parish, and been at the ringin' o' every bell, and the diggin' o' every grave, and sung i' the quire long afore Bartle Massey come from nobody knows where, wi' his counter-singin',[14] and fine anthems, as puts everybody out but himself — one takin' it up after another like sheep a-bleatin' i' th' fold. I know what belongs to bein' a parish clerk, and I know as I should be wantin' i' respect to your reverence, an' church, an' king, if I was t' allow such goins-on wi'out speakin'. I was took by surprise, an' knowed nothin' on it beforehand, an' I was so flustered, I was clean as if I'd lost my tools. I hanna slep more nor four hour this night as is past an' gone; an' then it was nothin' but nightmare, as tired me worse nor wakin'.'

'Why, what in the world is the matter, Joshua? Have the thieves been at the church lead[15] again?'

'Thieves! no, sir, — an' yet, as I may say, it *is* thieves, an' a-thievin' the church, too. It's the Methodisses as is like to get th' upper hand i' th' parish, if your reverence an' his honour, Squire Donnithorne, doesna think well to say the word an' forbid it. Not as I'm a-dictatin' to you, sir; I'm not forgettin' myself so far as to be wise above my betters. Howiver, whether I'm wise or no, that's neither here nor there, but what I've got to say I say — as the young Methodis woman, as is at Mester Poyser's, was a-preachin' an' a-praying on the Green last night, as sure as I'm a-stannin' afore your reverence now.'

'Preaching on the Green!' said Mr Irwine, looking surprised but quite serene. 'What, that pale pretty young woman I've seen at Poyser's? I saw she was a Methodist, or Quaker, or something of that sort, by her dress, but I didn't know she was a preacher.'

'It's a true word as I say, sir,' rejoined Mr Rann, compressing his mouth into a semicircular form, and pausing long enough to indicate three notes of exclamation. 'She preached on the Green last night; an' she's laid hold of Chad's Bess, as the girl's been i' fits welly iver sin'.'

'Well, Bessy Cranage is a hearty-looking lass; I daresay she'll come round again, Joshua. Did anybody else go into fits?'

'No, sir, I canna say as they did. But there's no knowin' what'll come, if we're t' have such preachins as that agoin' on ivery week — there'll be no livin' i' th' village. For them Methodisses make folks believe as if they take a mug o' drink extry, an' make theirselves a bit comfortable, they'll have to go to hell for't as sure as they're born. I'm not a tipplin' man nor a drunkard — nobody can say it on me — but I like a extry quart at Easter or Christmas time, as is nat'ral when we're goin' the rounds a-singin', an' folks offer't you for nothin'; or when I'm a-collectin' the dues; an' I like a pint wi' my pipe, an' a neighbourly chat at Mester Casson's now an' then, for I was brought up i' the Church, thank God, an' ha' been a parish clerk this two-an'-thirty year: I should know what the church religion is.'

‘Well, what’s your advice, Joshua? What do you think should be done?’

‘Well, your reverence, I’m not for takin’ any measures again the young woman. She’s well enough if she’d let alone preachin’; an’ I hear as she’s a-goin’ away back to her own country soon. She’s Mr Poyser’s own niece, an’ I donna wish to say what’s anyways disrespectful o’ th’ family at th’ Hall Farm, as I’ve measured for shoes, little an’ big, welly iver sin’ I’ve been a shoemaker. But there’s that Will Maskery, sir, as is the ram-pageousest Methodis as can be, an’ I make no doubt it was him as stirred up th’ young woman to preach last night, an’ he’ll be a bringin’ other folks to preach from Treddles’on, if his comb isn’t cut a bit;[16] an’ I think as he should be let know as he isna t’ have the makin’ an’ mendin’ o’ church carts an’ implemens, let alone stayin’ i’ that house an’ yard as is Squire Donnithorne’s.’

‘Well, but you say yourself, Joshua, that you never knew any one come to preach on the Green before; why should you think they’ll come again? The Methodists don’t come to preach in little villages like Hayslope, where there’s only a handful of labourers, too tired to listen to them. They might almost as well go and preach on the Binton Hills. Will Maskery is no preacher himself, I think.’

‘Nay, sir, he’s no gift at stringin’ the words together wi’out book; he’d be stuck fast like a cow i’ wet clay. But he’s got tongue enough to speak disrespectful about’s neebors, for he said as I was a blind Pharisee;[17] — a-usin’ the Bible i’ that way to find nicknames for folks as are his elders an’ betters! — and what’s worse, he’s been heard to say very unbecomin’ words about your reverence; for I could bring them as ’ud swear as he called you a “dumb dog”, an’ a “idle shepherd”.[18] You’ll forgi’e me for sayin’ such things over again.’

‘Better not, better not, Joshua. Let evil words die as soon as they’re spoken. Will Maskery might be a great deal worse fellow than he is. He used to be a wild drunken rascal, neglecting his work and beating his wife, they told me; now he’s thrifty and decent, and he and his wife look comfortable together. If you can bring me any proof that he interferes with his neighbours, and creates any disturbance, I shall think it my duty as a clergyman and a magistrate to interfere. But it wouldn’t become wise people, like you and me, to be making a fuss about trifles, as if we thought the Church was in danger because Will Maskery lets his tongue wag rather foolishly, or a young woman talks in a serious way to a handful of people on the Green. We must “live and let live”, Joshua, in religion as well as in other things. You go on doing your duty, as parish clerk and sexton, as well as you’ve always done it, and making those capital thick boots for your neighbours, and things won’t go far wrong in Hayslope, depend upon it.’

‘Your reverence is very good to say so; an’ I’m sensable as, you not livin’ i’ the parish, there’s more upo’ my shoulders.’

‘To be sure; and you must mind and not lower the Church in people’s eyes by seeming to be frightened about it for a little thing, Joshua. I shall trust to your good sense, now, to take no notice at all of what Will Maskery says, either about you or me. You and your neighbours can go on taking your pot of beer soberly, when you’ve done your day’s work, like good churchmen; and if Will Maskery doesn’t like to join you, but to go to a prayer-meeting at Treddleston instead, let him; that’s no business of yours, so long as he doesn’t hinder you from doing what you like. And as to people saying a few idle words about us, we must not mind that, any more than the old church-steeple minds the rooks cawing about it. Will Maskery comes to church every Sunday afternoon, and does his wheelwright’s business steadily in the week-days, and as long as he does that he must be let alone.’

‘Ah, sir, but when he comes to church, he sits an’ shakes his head, an’ looks as sour an’ as coxy[19] when we’re a-singin’, as I should like to fetch him a rap across the jowl — God forgi’e me — an’ Mrs Irwine, an’ your reverence, too, for speakin’ so afore you. An’ he said as our Christmas singin’ was no better nor the cracklin’ o’ thorns under a pot.’[20]

‘Well, he’s got a bad ear for music, Joshua. When people have wooden heads, you know, it can’t be helped. He won’t bring the other people in Hayslope round to his opinion, while you go on singing as well as you do.’

‘Yes, sir, but it turns a man’s stomach t’ hear the Scripture misused i’ that way. I know as much o’ the words o’ the Bible as he does, an’ could say the Psalms right through i’ my sleep if you was to pinch me; but I know better nor to take ’em to say my own say wi’. I might as well take the Sacriment-cup[21] home and use it at meals.’

‘That’s a very sensible remark of yours, Joshua; but, as I said before–’

While Mr Irwine was speaking, the sound of a booted step, and the clink of a spur, were heard on the stone floor of the entrance-hall, and Joshua Rann moved hastily aside from the doorway to make room for some one who paused there, and said, in a ringing tenor voice,

‘Godson Arthur; — may he come in?’

‘Come in, come in, godson!’ Mrs Irwine answered, in the deep half-masculine tone which belongs to the vigorous old woman, and there entered a young gentleman in a riding-dress, with his right arm in a sling;

whereupon followed that pleasant confusion of laughing interjections, and hand-shakings, and ‘How are you’s?’ mingled with joyous short barks and wagging of tails on the part of the canine members of the family, which tells that the visitor is on the best terms with the visited. The young gentleman was Arthur Donnithorne, known in Hayslope, variously, as ‘the young squire’, ‘the heir’, and ‘the captain’. He was only a captain in the Loamshire Militia; but to the Hayslope tenants he was more intensely a captain than all the young gentlemen of the same rank in his Majesty’s regulars[22] — he outshone them as the planet Jupiter outshines the Milky Way. If you want to know more particularly how he looked, call to your remembrance some tawny-whiskered, brown-locked, clear-complexioned young Englishman whom you have met with in a foreign town, and been proud of as a fellow-countryman — well-washed, high-bred, white-handed, yet looking as if he could deliver well from the left shoulder, and floor his man: I will not be so much of a tailor as to trouble your imagination with the difference of costume, and insist on the striped waistcoat, long-tailed coat, and low top-boots.

Turning round to take a chair, Captain Donnithorne said, ‘But don’t let me interrupt Joshua’s business — he has something to say.’

‘Humbly begging your honour’s pardon,’ said Joshua, bowing low, ‘there was one thing I had to say to his reverence as other things had drove out o’ my head.’

‘Out with it, Joshua, quickly!’ said Mr Irwine.

‘Belike, sir, you havena heared as Thias Bede’s dead – drownded this morning, or more like overnight, i’ the Willow Brook, again’ the bridge right i’ front o’ the house.’

‘Ah!’ exclaimed both the gentlemen at once, as if they were a good deal interested in the information.

‘An’ Seth Bede’s been to me this morning to say he wished me to tell your reverence as his brother Adam begged of you particular t’ allow his father’s grave to be dug by the White Thorn, because his mother’s set her heart on it, on account of a dream as she had; an’ they’d ha’ come theirselves to ask you, but they’ve so much to see after with the crowner,[23] an’ that; an’ their mother’s took on so, an’ wants ’em to make sure o’ the spot for fear somebody else should take it. An’ if your reverence sees well and good, I’ll send my boy to tell ’em as soon as I get home; an’ that’s why I make bold to trouble you wi’ it, his honour being present.’

‘To be sure, Joshua, to be sure, they shall have it. I’ll ride round to Adam myself, and see him. Send your boy, however, to say they shall have the grave, lest anything should happen to detain me. And now, good morning, Joshua; go into the kitchen and have some ale.’

‘Poor old Thias!’ said Mr Irwine, when Joshua was gone, ‘I’m afraid the drink helped the brook to drown him. I should have been glad for the load to have been taken off my friend Adam’s shoulders in a less painful way. That fine fellow has been propping up his father from ruin for the last five or six years.’

‘He’s a regular trump, is Adam,’ said Captain Donnithorne. ‘When I was a little fellow, and Adam was a strapping lad of fifteen, and taught me carpentering, I used to think if ever I was a rich sultan, I would make Adam my grand-vizier.[24] And I believe now, he would bear the exaltation as well as any poor wise man in an Eastern story. If ever I live to be a large-acred man instead of a poor devil with a mortgaged allowance of pocket-money, I’ll have Adam for my right-hand. He shall manage my woods for me, for he seems to have a better notion of those things than any man I ever met with; and I know he would make twice the money of them that my grandfather does, with that miserable old Satchell to manage, who understands no more about timber than an old carp. I’ve mentioned the subject to my grandfather once or twice, but for some reason or other he has a dislike to Adam, and *I* can do nothing. But come, your reverence, are you for a ride with me? It’s splendid out of doors now. We can go to Adam’s together, if you like; but I want to call at the Hall Farm on my way, to look at the whelps Poyser is keeping for me.’

‘You must stay and have lunch first, Arthur,’ said Mrs Irwine. ‘It’s nearly two. Carroll will bring it in directly.’

‘I want to go to the Hall Farm too,’ said Mr Irwine, ‘to have another look at the little Methodist who is staying there. Joshua tells me she was preaching on the Green last night.’

‘Oh, by Jove!’ said Captain Donnithorne, laughing. ‘Why, she looks as quiet as a mouse. There’s something rather striking about her, though. I positively felt quite bashful the first time I saw her: she was sitting stooping over her sewing in the sunshine outside the house, when I rode up and called out, without noticing that she was a stranger, “Is Martin Poyser at home?” I declare, when she got up and looked at me, and just said, “He’s in the house, I believe: I’ll go and call him”, I felt quite ashamed of having spoken so abruptly to her. She looked like St Catherine[25] in a Quaker dress. It’s a type of face one rarely sees among our common people.’

‘I should like to see the young woman, Dauphin,’ said Mrs Irwine. ‘Make her come here on some pretext or other.’

‘I don’t know how I can manage that, mother; it will hardly do for me to patronize a Methodist preacher,

even if she would consent to be patronized by an idle shepherd, as Will Maskery calls me. You should have come in a little sooner, Arthur, to hear Joshua's denunciation of his neighbour Will Maskery. The old fellow wants me to excommunicate the wheelwright, and then deliver him over to the civil arm — that is to say, to your grandfather — to be turned out of house and yard. If I chose to interfere in this business, now, I might get up as pretty a story of hatred and persecution as the Methodists need desire to publish in the next number of their magazine.[26] It wouldn't take me much trouble to persuade Chad Cranage and half-a-dozen other bull-headed fellows, that they would be doing an acceptable service to the Church by hunting Will Maskery out of the village with rope-ends and pitchforks; and then, when I had furnished them with half a sovereign to get gloriously drunk after their exertions, I should have put the climax to as pretty a farce as any of my brother clergy have set going in their parishes for the last thirty years.'

'It is really insolent of the man, though, to call you an "idle shepherd", and a "dumb dog",' said Mrs Irwine: 'I should be inclined to check him a little there. You are too easy-tempered, Dauphin.'

'Why, mother, you don't think it would be a good way of sustaining my dignity to set about vindicating myself from the aspersions of Will Maskery? Besides, I'm not so sure that they *are* aspersions. I *am* a lazy fellow, and get terribly heavy in my saddle; not to mention that I'm always spending more than I can afford in bricks and mortar, so that I get savage at a lame beggar when he asks me for sixpence. Those poor lean cobblers,[27] who think they can help to regenerate mankind by setting out to preach in the morning twilight before they begin their day's work, may well have a poor opinion of me. But come, let us have our luncheon. isn't Kate coming to lunch?'

'Miss Irwine told Bridget to take her lunch up-stairs,' said Carroll; 'she can't leave Miss Anne.'

'Oh, very well. Tell Bridget to say I'll go up and see Miss Anne presently. You can use your right arm quite well, now, Arthur,' Mr Irwine continued, observing that Captain Donnithorne had taken his arm out of the sling.

'Yes, pretty well; but Godwin insists on my keeping it up constantly for some time to come. I hope I shall be able to get away to the regiment, though, in the beginning of August. It's a desperately dull business being shut up at the Chase in the summer months, when one can neither hunt nor shoot, so as to make one's self pleasantly sleepy in the evening. However, we are to astonish the echoes on the 30th of July. My grandfather has given me *carte blanche* for once, and I promise you the entertainment shall be worthy of the occasion. The world will not see the grand epoch of my majority[28] twice. I think I shall have a lofty throne for you, godmamma, or rather two, one on the lawn and another in the ball-room, that you may sit and look down upon us like an Olympian goddess.'[29]

'I mean to bring out my best brocade, that I wore at your christening twenty years ago,' said Mrs Irwine. 'Ah, I think I shall see your poor mother flitting about in her white dress, which looked to me almost like a shroud that very day; and it *was* her shroud only three months after; and your little cap and christening dress were buried with her too. She had set her heart on that, sweet soul! Thank God you take after your mother's family, Arthur. If you had been a puny, wiry, yellow baby, I wouldn't have stood godmother to you. I should have been sure you would turn out a Donnithorne. But you were such a broad-faced, broad-chested, loud-screaming rascal, I knew you were every inch of you a Tradgett.'

'But you might have been a little too hasty there, mother,' said Mr Irwine, smiling. 'Don't you remember how it was with Juno's last pups? One of them was the very image of its mother, but it had two or three of its father's tricks notwithstanding. Nature is clever enough to cheat even you, mother.'

'Nonsense, child! Nature never makes a ferret in the shape of a mastiff. You'll never persuade me that I can't tell what men are by their outsides. If I don't like a man's looks, depend upon it I shall never like *him*. I don't want to know people that look ugly and disagreeable, any more than I want to taste dishes that look disagreeable. If they make me shudder at the first glance, I say, take them away. An ugly, piggish, or fishy eye, now, makes me feel quite ill; it's like a bad smell.'

'Talking of eyes,' said Captain Donnithorne, 'that reminds me that I've got a book I meant to bring you, godmamma. It came down in a parcel from London the other day. I know you are fond of queer, wizard-like stories. It's a volume of poems, "Lyrical Ballads": most of them seem to be twaddling stuff; but the first is in a different style — "The Ancient Mariner"[30] is the title. I can hardly make head or tail of it as a story, but it's a strange, striking thing. I'll send it over to you; and there are some other books that *you* may like to see, Irwine — pamphlets about Antinomianism and Evangelicalism,[31] whatever they may be. I can't think what the fellow means by sending such things to me. I've written to him, to desire that from henceforth he will send me no book or pamphlet on anything that ends in *ism*.'

'Well, I don't know that I'm very fond of *isms* myself; but I may as well look at the pamphlets; they let one see what is going on. I've a little matter to attend to, Arthur,' continued Mr Irwine, rising to leave the room, 'and then I shall be ready to set out with you.'

The little matter that Mr Irwine had to attend to took him up the old stone staircase (part of the house was very old), and made him pause before a door at which he knocked gently. ‘Come in,’ said a woman’s voice, and he entered a room so darkened by blinds and curtains that Miss Kate, the thin middle-aged lady standing by the bedside, would not have had light enough for any other sort of work than the knitting which lay on the little table near her. But at present she was doing what required only the dimmest light — sponging the aching head that lay on the pillow with fresh vinegar. It was a small face, that of the poor sufferer; perhaps it had once been pretty, but now it was worn and sallow. Miss Kate came towards her brother and whispered, ‘Don’t speak to her; she can’t bear to be spoken to to-day.’ Anne’s eyes were closed, and her brow contracted as if from intense pain. Mr Irwine went to the bedside, and took up one of the delicate hands and kissed it; a slight pressure from the small fingers told him that it was worth while to have come up-stairs for the sake of doing that. He lingered a moment, looking at her, and then turned away and left the room, treading very gently — he had taken off his boots and put on slippers before he came up-stairs. Whoever remembers how many things he has declined to do even for himself, rather than have the trouble of putting on or taking off his boots, will not think this last detail insignificant.

And Mr Irwine’s sisters, as any person of family within ten miles of Broxton could have testified, were such stupid, uninteresting women! It was quite a pity handsome, clever Mrs Irwine should have had such commonplace daughters. That fine old lady herself was worth driving ten miles to see, any day; her beauty, her well-preserved faculties, and her old-fashioned dignity, made her a graceful subject for conversation in turn with the King’s health, the sweet new patterns in cotton dresses, the news from Egypt, and Lord Dacey’s lawsuit,[32] which was fretting poor Lady Dacey to death. But no one ever thought of mentioning the Miss Irwines, except the poor people in Broxton village, who regarded them as deep in the science of medicine, and spoke of them vaguely as ‘the gentlefolks’. If any one had asked old Job Dummilow who gave him his flannel jacket, he would have answered, ‘the gentlefolks, last winter’; and widow Steene dwelt much on the virtues of the ‘stuff’ the gentlefolks gave her for her cough. Under this name, too, they were used with great effect as a means of taming refractory children, so that at the sight of poor Miss Anne’s sallow face, several small urchins had a terrified sense that she was cognisant of all their worst misdemeanours, and knew the precise number of stones with which they had intended to hit farmer Britton’s ducks. But for all who saw them through a less mythical medium, the Miss Irwines were quite superfluous existences; inartistic figures crowding the canvas of life without adequate effect. Miss Anne, indeed, if her chronic headaches could have been accounted for by a pathetic story of disappointed love, might have had some romantic interest attached to her; but no such story had either been known or invented concerning her, and the general impression was quite in accordance with the fact, that both the sisters were old maids for the prosaic reason that they had never received an eligible offer.

Nevertheless, to speak paradoxically, the existence of insignificant people has very important consequences in the world. It can be shown to affect the price of bread and the rate of wages, to call forth many evil tempers from the selfish, and many heroisms from the sympathetic, and, in other ways, to play no small part in the tragedy of life. And if that handsome, generous-blooded clergyman, the Rev. Adolphus Irwine, had not had these two hopelessly-maiden sisters, his lot would have been shaped quite differently: he would very likely have taken a comely wife in his youth, and now, when his hair was getting grey under the powder, would have had tall sons and blooming daughters — such possessions, in short, as men commonly think will repay them for all the labour they take under the sun. As it was — having with all his three livings no more than seven hundred a-year, and seeing no way of keeping his splendid mother and his sickly sister, not to reckon a second sister, who was usually spoken of without any adjective, in such lady-like ease as became their birth and habits, and at the same time providing for a family of his own — he remained, you see, at the age of eight-and-f orty, a bachelor, not making any merit of that renunciation, but saying laughingly, if any one alluded to it, that he made it an excuse for many indulgences which a wife would never have allowed him. And perhaps he was the only person in the world who did not think his sisters uninteresting and superfluous; for his was one of those large-hearted, sweet-blooded natures that never know a narrow or a grudging thought; epicurean,[33] if you will, with no enthusiasm, no self-scourging sense of duty; but yet, as you have seen, of a sufficiently subtle moral fibre to have an unwearying tenderness for obscure and monotonous suffering. It was his large-hearted indulgence that made him ignore his mother’s hardness towards her daughters, which was the more striking from its contrast with her doting fondness towards himself: he held it no virtue to frown at irremediable faults.

See the difference between the impression a man makes on you when you walk by his side in familiar talk, or look at him in his home, and the figure he makes when seen from a lofty historical level, or even in the eyes of a critical neighbour who thinks of him as an embodied system or opinion rather than as a man. Mr Roe, the ‘travelling preacher’[34] stationed at Treddleston, had included Mr Irwine in a general statement concerning the Church clergy in the surrounding district, whom he described as men given up to the lusts of

the flesh and the pride of life; hunting and shooting, and adorning their own houses; asking what shall we eat, and what shall we drink, and wherewithal shall we be clothed? — careless of dispensing the bread of life to their flocks, preaching at best but a carnal and soul-benumbing morality, and trafficking in the souls of men by receiving money[35] for discharging the pastoral office in parishes where they did not so much as look on the faces of the people more than once a-year. The ecclesiastical historian, too, looking into parliamentary reports of that period, finds honourable members[36] zealous for the Church, and untainted with any sympathy for the 'tribe of canting Methodists', making statements scarcely less melancholy than that of Mr Roe. And it is impossible for me to say that Mr Irwine was altogether belied by the generic classification assigned him. He really had no very lofty aims, no theological enthusiasm: if I were closely questioned, I should be obliged to confess that he felt no serious alarms about the souls of his parishioners, and would have thought it a mere loss of time to talk in a doctrinal and awakening manner to old 'Feyther Taft', or even to Chad Cranage the blacksmith. If he had been in the habit of speaking theoretically, he would perhaps have said that the only healthy form religion could take in such minds was that of certain dim but strong emotions, suffusing themselves as a hallowing influence over the family affections and neighbourly duties. He thought the custom of baptism more important than its doctrine, and that the religious benefits the peasant drew from the church where his fathers worshipped and the sacred piece of turf where they lay buried, were but slightly dependent on a clear understanding of the Liturgy or the sermon. Clearly the Rector was not what is called in these days an 'earnest' man: he was fonder of church history than of divinity, and had much more insight into men's characters than interest in their opinions; he was neither laborious, nor obviously self-denying, nor very copious in almsgiving, and his theology, you perceive, was lax. His mental palate, indeed, was rather pagan, and found a savouriness in a quotation from Sophocles or Theocritus[37] that was quite absent from any text in Isaiah or Amos. But if you feed your young setter on raw flesh, how can you wonder at its retaining a relish for uncooked partridge in after-life? and Mr Irwine's recollections of young enthusiasm and ambition were all associated with poetry and ethics that lay aloof from the Bible.

On the other hand, I must plead, for I have an affectionate partiality towards the Rector's memory, that he was not vindictive — and some philanthropists have been so; that he was not intolerant — and there is a rumour that some zealous theologians have not been altogether free from that blemish; that although he would probably have declined to give his body to be burned in any public cause, and was far from bestowing all his goods to feed the poor, he had that charity[38] which has sometimes been lacking to very illustrious virtue — he was tender to other men's failings, and unwilling to impute evil. He was one of those men, and they are not the commonest, of whom we can know the best only by following them away from the market-place, the platform, and the pulpit, entering with them into their own homes, hearing the voice with which they speak to the young and aged about their own hearthstone, and witnessing their thoughtful care for the everyday wants of everyday companions, who take all their kindness as a matter of course, and not as a subject for panegyric.[39]

Such men, happily, have lived in times when great abuses flourished, and have sometimes even been the living representatives of the abuses. That is a thought which might comfort us a little under the opposite fact — that it is better sometimes *not* to follow great reformers of abuses beyond the threshold of their homes.

But whatever you may think of Mr Irwine now, if you had met him that June afternoon riding on his grey cob, with his dogs running beside him — portly, upright, manly, with a good-natured smile on his finely-turned lips as he talked to his dashing young companion on the bay mare, you must have felt that, however ill he harmonized with sound theories of the clerical office, he somehow harmonized extremely well with that peaceful landscape.

See them in the bright sunlight, interrupted every now and then by rolling masses of cloud, ascending the slope from the Broxton side, where the tall gables and elms of the rectory predominate over the tiny white-washed church. They will soon be in the parish of Hayslope; the grey church-tower and village roofs lie before them to the left, and farther on, to the right, they can just see the chimneys of the Hall Farm.

CHAPTER VI

The Hall Farm

Evidently that gate is never opened: for the long grass and the great hemlocks grow close against it; and if it were opened, it is so rusty, that the force necessary to turn it on its hinges would be likely to pull down the square stone-built pillars, to the detriment of the two stone lionesses which grin with a doubtful carnivorous affability above a coat of arms, surmounting each of the pillars. It would be easy enough, by the aid of the nicks in the stone pillars, to climb over the brick wall with its smooth stone coping; but by putting our eyes close to the rusty bars of the gate, we can see the house well enough, and all but the very corners of the grassy enclosure.

It is a very fine old place, of red brick, softened by a pale powdery lichen, which has dispersed itself with happy irregularity, so as to bring the red brick into terms of friendly companionship with the limestone ornaments surrounding the three gables, the windows, and the door-place. But the windows are patched with wooden panes, and the door, I think, is like the gate — it is never opened: how it would groan and grate against the stone floor if it were! For it is a solid, heavy, handsome door, and must once have been in the habit of shutting with a sonorous bang behind a liveried lackey, who had just seen his master and mistress off the grounds in a carriage and pair.

But at present one might fancy the house in the early stage of a chancery suit,[1] and that the fruit from that grand double row of walnut-trees on the right hand of the enclosure would fall and rot among the grass, if it were not that we heard the booming bark of dogs echoing from great buildings at the back. And now the half-weaned calves that have been sheltering themselves in a gorse-built hovel against the left-hand wall, come out and set up a silly answer to that terrible bark, doubtless supposing that it has reference to buckets of milk.

Yes, the house must be inhabited, and we will see by whom; for imagination is a licensed trespasser: it has no fear of dogs, but may climb over walls and peep in at windows with impunity. Put your face to one of the glass panes in the right-hand window: what do you see? A large open fireplace, with rusty dogs[2] in it, and a bare-boarded floor; at the far end, fleeces of wool stacked up; in the middle of the floor, some empty corn bags. That is the furniture of the dining-room. And what through the left-hand window? Several clothes-horses, a pillion,[3] spinning-wheel, and an old box wide open, and stuffed full of coloured rags. At the edge of this box there lies a great wooden doll, which, so far as mutilation is concerned, bears a strong resemblance to the finest Greek sculpture,[4] and especially in the total loss of its nose. Near it there is a little chair, and the butt-end of a boy's leather long-lashed whip.

The history of the house is plain now. It was once the residence of a country squire, whose family, probably dwindling down to mere spinsterhood, got merged in the more territorial name of Donnithorne. It was once the Hall; it is now the Hall Farm. Like the life in some coast-town that was once a watering-place,[5] and is now a port, where the genteel streets are silent and grass-grown, and the docks and warehouses busy and resonant, the life at the Hall has changed its focus, and no longer radiates from the parlour, but from the kitchen and the farmyard.

Plenty of life there! though this is the drowsiest time of the year, just before hay-harvest; and it is the drowsiest time of the day too, for it is close upon three by the sun, and it is half-past three by Mrs Poyser's handsome eight-day clock.[6] But there is always a stronger sense of life when the sun is brilliant after rain; and now he is pouring down his beams, and making sparkles among the wet straw, and lighting up every patch of vivid green moss on the red tiles of the cow-shed, and turning even the muddy water that is hurrying along the channel to the drain into a mirror for the yellow-billed ducks, who are seizing the opportunity of getting a drink with as much body in it as possible. There is quite a concert of noises: the great bull-dog, chained against the stables, is thrown into furious exasperation by the unwary approach of a cock too near the mouth of his kennel, and sends forth a thundering bark, which is answered by two fox-hounds shut up in the opposite cow-house; the old top-knotted hens, scratching with their chicks among the straw, set up a sympathetic croaking as the discomfited cock joins them; a sow with her brood, all very muddy as to the legs, and curled as to the tail, throws in some deep staccato notes; our friends the calves are bleating from the home croft; and, under all, a fine ear discerns the continuous hum of human voices.

For the great barn-doors are thrown wide open, and men are busy there mending the harness, under the superintendence of Mr Goby the 'whittaw',[7] otherwise saddler, who entertains them with the latest Treddleston gossip. It is certainly rather an unfortunate day that Alick, the shepherd, has chosen for having the whittaws, since the morning turned out so wet; and Mrs Poyser has spoken her mind pretty strongly as to the dirt which the extra number of men's shoes brought into the house at dinner-time. Indeed, she has not yet recovered her equanimity on the subject, though it is now nearly three hours since dinner, and the house-floor is perfectly clean again; as clean as everything else in that wonderful house-place, where the only chance of collecting a few grains of dust would be to climb on the salt-coffer, and put your finger on the high mantel-shelf on which the glittering brass candle-sticks are enjoying their summer sinecure; for at this time of year, of course, every one goes to bed while it is yet light, or at least light enough to discern the outline of objects after you have bruised your shins against them. Surely nowhere else could an oak clock-case and an oak table have got to such a polish by the hand: genuine 'elbow polish', as Mrs Poyser called it, for she thanked God she never had any of your varnished rubbish in her house. Hetty Sorrel often took the opportunity, when her aunt's back was turned, of looking at the pleasing reflection of herself in those polished surfaces, for the oak table was usually turned up like a screen, and was more for ornament than for use; and she could see herself sometimes in the great round pewter dishes that were ranged on the shelves above the long deal dinner-table, or in the hobs of the grate, which always shone like jasper.[8]

Everything was looking at its brightest at this moment, for the sun shone right on the pewter dishes, and from their reflecting surfaces pleasant jets of light were thrown on mellow oak and bright brass; — and on a still pleasanter object than these; for some of the rays fell on Dinah's finely moulded cheek, and lit up her pale red hair to auburn, as she bent over the heavy household linen which she was mending for her aunt. No scene could have been more peaceful, if Mrs Poyser, who was ironing a few things that still remained from the Monday's wash, had not been making a frequent clinking with her iron, and moving to and fro whenever she wanted it to cool; carrying the keen glance of her blue-grey eye from the kitchen to the dairy, where Hetty was making up the butter, and from the dairy to the back-kitchen, where Nancy was taking the pies out of the oven. Do not suppose, however, that Mrs Poyser was elderly or shrewish in her appearance; she was a good-looking woman, not more than eight-and-thirty, of fair complexion and sandy hair, well-shapen, light-footed: the most conspicuous article in her attire was an ample checkered linen apron, which almost covered her skirt; and nothing could be plainer or less noticeable than her cap and gown, for there was no weakness of which she was less tolerant than feminine vanity, and the preference of ornament to utility. The family likeness between her and her niece Dinah Morris, with the contrast between her keenness and Dinah's seraphic gentleness of expression, might have served a painter as an excellent suggestion for a Martha and Mary.[9] Their eyes were just of the same colour, but a striking test of the difference in their operation was seen in the demeanour of Trip, the black-and-tan terrier, whenever that much-suspected dog unwarily exposed himself to the freezing arctic ray of Mrs Poyser's glance. Her tongue was not less keen than her eye, and, whenever a damsel came within earshot, seemed to take up an unfinished lecture, as a barrel-organ takes up a tune, precisely at the point where it had left off.

The fact that it was churning-day[10] was another reason why it was inconvenient to have the 'whittaws', and why, consequently, Mrs Poyser should scold Molly the housemaid with unusual severity. To all appearance Molly had got through her after-dinner work in an exemplary manner, had 'cleaned herself' with great despatch, and now came to ask, submissively, if she should sit down to her spinning till milking-time. But this blameless conduct, according to Mrs Poyser, shrouded a secret indulgence of unbecoming wishes, which she now dragged forth and held up to Molly's view with cutting eloquence.

'Spinning, indeed! It isn't spinning as you'd be at, I'll be bound, and let you have your own way. I never knew your equals for gallowsness.[11] To think of a gell o' your age wanting to go and sit with half-a-dozen men! I'd ha' been ashamed to let the words pass over my lips if I'd been you. And you, as have been here ever since last Michaelmas, and I hired you at Treddles'on stattits, without a bit o' character[12] — as I say, you might be grateful to be hired in that way to a respectable place; and you knew no more o' what belongs to work when you come here than the mawkin[13] i' the field. As poor a two-fisted thing as ever I saw, you know you was. Who taught you to scrub a floor, I should like to know? Why, you'd leave the dirt in heaps i' the corners — anybody 'ud think you'd never been brought up among Christians. And as for spinning, why, you've wasted as much as your wage i' the flax you've spoiled learning to spin.[14] And you've a right to feel that, and not to go about as gaping and as thoughtless as if you was beholding to nobody. Comb the wool for the whittaws,[15] indeed! That's what you'd like to be doing is it? That's the way with you — that's the road you'd all like to go, headlongs to ruin. You're never easy till you've got some sweetheart as is as big a fool as yourself: you think you'll be finely off when you're married, I daresay, and have got a three-legged stool to sit on, and never a blanket to cover you, and a bit o' oat-cake for your dinner, as three children are a-snatching at.'

‘I’m sure I donna want t’ go wi’ the whittaws,’ said Molly, whimpering, and quite overcome by this Dantean picture[16] of her future, ‘On’y we allays used to comb the wool for’n at Mester Ottley’s; an’ so I just axed ye. I donna want to set eyes on the whittaws again; I wish I may never stir if I do.’

‘Mr Ottley’s, indeed! It’s fine talking o’ what you did at Mr Ottley’s. Your missis there might like her floors dirted wi’ whittaws for what I know. There’s no knowing what people *wonna* like — such ways as I’ve heard of! I never had a gell come into my house as seemed to know what cleaning was; I think people live like pigs, for my part. And as to that Betty as was dairymaid at Trent’s before she come to me, she’d ha’ left the cheeses without turning from week’s end to week’s end, and the dairy thralls,[17] I might ha’ wrote my name on ’em when I come down-stairs after my illness, as the doctor said it was inflammation — it was a mercy I got well of it. And to think o’ your knowing no better, Molly, and been here a-going i’ nine months, and not for want o’ talking to, neither — and what are you stanning there for, like a jack as is run down, istead o’ getting your wheel out?[18] You’re a rare un for sitting down to your work a little while after it’s time to put by.’

‘Munny, my iron’s twite told; pease put it down to warm.’

The small chirruping voice that uttered this request came from a little sunny-haired girl between three and four, who, seated on a high chair at the end of the ironing-table, was arduously clutching the handle of a miniature iron with her tiny fat fist, and ironing rags with an assiduity that required her to put her little red tongue out as far as anatomy would allow.

‘Cold, is it, my darling? Bless your sweet face!’ said Mrs Poyser, who was remarkable for the facility with which she could relapse from her official objurgatory tone to one of fondness or of friendly converse. ‘Never mind! Mother’s done her ironing now. She’s going to put the ironing things away.’

‘Munny, I tould ’ike to do into de barn to Tommy, to see de whittawd.’

‘No, no, no; Totty ’ud get her feet wet,’ said Mrs Poyser, carrying away her iron. ‘Run into the dairy, and see cousin Hetty make the butter.’

‘I tould ’ike a bit o’ pum-take,’ rejoined Totty, who seemed to be provided with several relays of requests; at the same time, taking the opportunity of her momentary leisure, to put her fingers into a bowl of starch, and drag it down, so as to empty the contents with tolerable completeness on to the ironing-sheet.

‘Did ever anybody see the like?’ screamed Mrs Poyser, running towards the table when her eye had fallen on the blue stream. ‘The child’s allays i’ mischief if your back’s turned a minute. What shall I do to you, you naughty, naughty gell?’

Totty, however, had descended from her chair with great swiftness, and was already in retreat towards the dairy with a sort of waddling run, and an amount of fat on the nape of her neck, which made her look like the metamorphosis of a white sucking-pig.

The starch having been wiped up by Molly’s help, and the ironing apparatus put by, Mrs Poyser took up her knitting, which always lay ready at hand, and was the work she liked best, because she could carry it on automatically as she walked to and fro. But now she came and sat down opposite Dinah, whom she looked at in a meditative way, as she knitted her grey worsted stocking.

‘You look th’ image o’ your aunt Judith, Dinah, when you sit a-sewing. I could almost fancy it was thirty years back, and I was a little gell at home, looking at Judith as she sat at her work, after she’d done th’ house up; only it was a little cottage, father’s was, and not a big rambling house as gets dirty i’ one corner as fast as you clean it in another; but for all that, I could fancy you was your aunt Judith, only her hair was a deal darker than yours, and she was stouter and broader i’ the shoulders. Judith and me allays hung together, though she had such queer ways, but your mother and her never could agree. Ah! your mother little thought as she’d have a daughter just cut out after the very pattern o’ Judith, and leave her an orphan, too, for Judith to take care on, and bring up with a spoon[19] when *she* was in the graveyard at Stoniton. I allays said that o’ Judith, as she’d bear a pound weight any day, to save anybody else carrying a ounce. And she was just the same from the first o’ my remembering her; it made no difference in her, as I could see, when she took to the Methodists, only she talked a bit different, and wore a different sort o’cap; but she’d never in her life spent a penny on herself more than keeping herself decent.’

‘She was a blessed woman,’ said Dinah; ‘God had given her a loving, self-forgetting nature, and He perfected it by grace. And she was very fond of you too, aunt Rachel. I’ve often heard her talk of you in the same sort of way. When she had that bad illness, and I was only eleven years old, she used to say, “You’ll have a friend on earth in your aunt Rachel, if I’m taken from you; for she has a kind heart”; and I’m sure I’ve found it so.’

‘I don’t know how, child; anybody ’ud be cunning[20] to do anything for you, I think; you’re like the birds o’ th’ air, and live nobody knows how. I’d ha’ been glad to behave to you like a mother’s sister, if you’d come and live i’ this country, where there’s some shelter and victual for man and beast, and folks don’t live

on the naked hills, like poultry a-scratching on a gravel bank. And then you might get married to some decent man, and there'd be plenty ready to have you, if you'd only leave off that preaching as is ten times worse than anything your aunt Judith ever did. And even if you'd marry Seth Bede, as is a poor wool-gathering Methodist, and's never like to have a penny beforehand, I know your uncle 'ud help you with a pig, and very like a cow, for he's allays been good-natur'd to my kin, for all they're poor, and made 'em welcome to the house; and 'ud do for you, I'll be bound, as much as ever he'd do for Hetty, though she's his own niece. And there's linen in the house as I could well spare you, for I've got lots o' sheeting and table-clothing, and towelling, as isn't made up. There's a piece o' sheeting I could give you as that squinting Kitty spun — she was a rare girl to spin, for all she squinted, and the children couldn't abide her; and, you know, the spinning's going on constant, and there's new linen wove twice as fast as the old wears out. But where's the use o' talking, if ye wonna be persuaded, and settle down like any other woman in her senses, istead o' wearing yourself out with walking and preaching, and giving away every penny you get, so as you've nothing saved against sickness; and all the things you've got i' the world, I verily believe, 'ud go into a bundle no bigger nor a double cheese. And all because you've got notions i' your head about religion more nor what's i' the Catechism and the Prayer-book.'

'But not more than what's in the Bible,[21] aunt,' said Dinah.

'Yes, and the Bible too, for that matter,' Mrs Poyser rejoined, rather sharply; 'else why shouldn't them as know best what's in the Bible — the parsons and people as have got nothing to do but learn it — do the same as you do? But, for the matter o' that, if everybody was to do like you, the world must come to a standstill; for if everybody tried to do without house and home, and with poor eating and drinking, and was allays talking as we must despise the things o' the world, as you say, I should like to know where the pick o' the stock, and the corn, and the best new-milk cheeses 'ud have to go. Everybody 'ud be wanting bread made o' tail-ends, and everybody 'ud be running after everybody else to preach to 'em, istead o' bringing up their families, and laying by against a bad harvest. It stands to sense as that can't be the right religion.'

'Nay, dear aunt, you never heard me say that all people are called to forsake their work and their families. It's quite right the land should be ploughed and sowed, and the precious corn stored, and the things of this life cared for, and right that people should rejoice in their families, and provide for them, so that this is done in the fear of the Lord, and that they are not unmindful of the soul's wants while they are caring for the body. We can all be servants of God wherever our lot is cast, but He gives us different sorts of work, according as He fits us for it and calls us to it. I can no more help spending my life in trying to do what I can for the souls of others, than you could help running if you heard little Totty crying at the other end of the house; the voice would go to your heart, you would think the dear child was in trouble or in danger, and you couldn't rest without running to help her and comfort her.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Poyser, rising and walking towards the door, 'I know it 'ud be just the same if I was to talk to you for hours. You'd make me the same answer at th' end. I might as well talk to the running brook, and tell it to stan' still.'

The causeway outside the kitchen door was dry enough now for Mrs Poyser to stand there quite pleasantly and see what was going on in the yard, the grey worsted stocking making a steady progress in her hands all the while. But she had not been standing there more than five minutes before she came in again, and said to Dinah, in rather a flurried, awe-stricken tone –

'If there isn't Captain Donnithorne and Mr Irwine a-coming into the yard! I'll lay my life they're come to speak about your preaching on the Green, Dinah; it's you must answer 'em, for I'm dumb. I've said enough a'ready about your bringing such disgrace upo' your uncle's family. I wouldn't ha' minded if you'd been Mr Poyser's own niece — folks must put up wi' their own kin, as they put up wi' their own noses — it's their own flesh and blood. But to think of a niece o' mine being cause o' my husband's being turned out of his farm, and me brought him no fortin but my savins-'

'Nay, dear aunt Rachel,' said Dinah gently, 'you've no cause for such fears. I've strong assurance that no evil will happen to you and my uncle and the children from anything I've done. I didn't preach without direction.'[22]

'Direction! I know very well what you mean by direction,' said Mrs Poyser, knitting in a rapid and agitated manner. 'When there's a bigger maggot than usial in your head you call it "direction"; and then nothing can stir you — you look like the statty[23] o' the outside o' Treddles'on church, a-starin' and a-smilin' whether it's fair weather or foul. I hanna common patience with you.'

By this time the two gentlemen had reached the palings, and had got down from their horses; it was plain they meant to come in. Mrs Poyser advanced to the door to meet them, curtsying low, and trembling between anger with Dinah and anxiety to conduct herself with perfect propriety on the occasion. For in those days the keenest of bucolic minds felt a whispering awe at the sight of the gentry, such as of old men felt when they stood on tip-toe to watch the gods passing by in tall human shape.

‘Well, Mrs Poyser, how are you after this stormy morning?’ said Mr Irwine, with his stately cordiality. ‘Our feet are quite dry; we shall not soil your beautiful floor.’

‘Oh, sir, don’t mention it,’ said Mrs Poyser. ‘Will you and the Captain please to walk into the parlour?’

‘No, indeed, thank you, Mrs Poyser,’ said the Captain, looking eagerly round the kitchen, as if his eye were seeking something it could not find. ‘I delight in your kitchen. I think it is the most charming room I know. I should like every farmer’s wife to come and look at it for a pattern.’

‘Oh, you’re pleased to say so, sir. Pray take a seat,’ said Mrs Poyser, relieved a little by this compliment and the Captain’s evident good-humour, but still glancing anxiously at Mr Irwine, who, she saw, was looking at Dinah and advancing towards her.

‘Poyser is not at home, is he?’ said Captain Donnithorne, seating himself where he could see along the short passage to the open dairy-door.

‘No, sir, he isn’t; he’s gone to Rosseter to see Mr West, the factor,[24] about the wool. But there’s father i’ the barn, sir, if he’d be of any use.’

‘No, thank you; I’ll just look at the whelps and leave a message about them with your shepherd. I must come another day and see your husband; I want to have a consultation with him about horses. Do you know when he’s likely to be at liberty?’

‘Why, sir, you can hardly miss him, except it’s o’ Treddles’on market-day — that’s of a Friday, you know. For if he’s anywhere on the farm we can send for him in a minute. If we’d got rid o’ the Scantlands we should have no outlying fields; and I should be glad of it, for if ever anything happens he’s sure to be gone to the Scantlands. Things allays happen so contrairy, if they’ve a chance; and it’s an unnat’ral thing to have one bit o’ your farm in one county and all the rest in another.’

‘Ah, the Scantlands would go much better with Choyce’s farm, especially as he wants dairy-land and you’ve got plenty. I think yours is the prettiest farm on the estate, though; and do you know, Mrs Poyser, if I were going to marry and settle, I should be tempted to turn you out, and do up this fine old house, and turn farmer myself.’

‘Oh, sir,’ said Mrs Poyser, rather alarmed, ‘you wouldn’t like it at all. As for farming, it’s putting money into your pocket wi’ your right hand and fetching it out wi’ your left. As fur as I can see, it’s raising victual for other folks, and just getting a mouthful for yourself and your children as you go along. Not as you’d be like a poor man as wants to get his bread: you could afford to lose as much money as you liked i’ farming; but it’s poor fun losing money, I should think, though I understan’ it’s what the great folks i’ London play at more than anything. For my husband heard at market as Lord Dacey’s eldest son had lost thousands upo’ thousands to the Prince o’ Wales, and they said my lady was going to pawn her jewels to pay for him. But you know more about that than I do, sir. But, as for farming, sir, I canna think as you’d like it; and this house — the draughts in it are enough to cut you through, and it’s my opinion the floors up-stairs are very rotten, and the rats i’ the cellar are beyond anything.’

‘Why, that’s a terrible picture, Mrs Poyser. I think I should be doing you a service to turn you out of such a place. But there’s no chance of that. I’m not likely to settle for the next twenty years, till I’m a stout gentleman of forty; and my grandfather would never consent to part with such good tenants as you.’

‘Well, sir, if he thinks so well o’ Mr Poyser for a tenant, I wish you could put in a word for him to allow us some new gates for the Five closes, for my husband’s been asking and asking till he’s tired, and to think o’ what he’s done for the farm, and’s never had a penny allowed him, be the times bad or good. And as I’ve said to my husband often and often, I’m sure if the Captain had anything to do with it, it wouldn’t be so. Not as I wish to speak disrespectful o’ them as have got the power i’ their hands, but it’s more than flesh and blood ’ull bear sometimes, to be toiling and striving, and up early and down late, and hardly sleeping a wink when you lie down for thinking as the cheese may swell, or the cows may slip their calf, or the wheat may grow green again i’ the sheaf — and after all, at th’ end o’ the year, it’s like as if you’d been cooking a feast and had got the smell of it for your pains.’

Mrs Poyser, once launched into conversation, always sailed along without any check from her preliminary awe of the gentry. The confidence she felt in her own powers of exposition was a motive force that overcame all resistance.

‘I’m afraid I should only do harm instead of good, if I were to speak about the gates, Mrs Poyser,’ said the Captain, ‘though I assure you there’s no man on the estate I would sooner say a word for than your husband. I know his farm is in better order than any other within ten miles of us; and as for the kitchen,’ he added, smiling, ‘I don’t believe there’s one in the kingdom to beat it. By the by, I’ve never seen your dairy: I must see your dairy, Mrs Poyser.’

‘Indeed, sir, it’s not fit for you to go in, for Hetty’s in the middle o’ making the butter, for the churning was thrown late, and I’m quite ashamed.’ This Mrs Poyser said blushing, and believing that the Captain was

really interested in her milk-pans, and would adjust his opinion of her to the appearance of her dairy.

'Oh, I've no doubt it's in capital order. Take me in,' said the Captain, himself leading the way, while Mrs Poyser followed.

CHAPTER VII

The Dairy

The dairy was certainly worth looking at; it was a scene to sicken for with a sort of calenture[1] in hot and dusty streets – such coolness, such purity, such fresh fragrance of new-pressed cheese, of firm butter, of wooden vessels perpetually bathed in pure water; such soft colouring of red earthenware and creamy surfaces, brown wood and polished tin, grey limestone and rich orange-red rust on the iron weights and hooks and hinges. But one gets only a confused notion of these details when they surround a distractingly pretty girl of seventeen, standing on little pattens[2] and rounding her dimpled arm to lift a pound of butter out of the scale.

Hetty blushed a deep rose-colour when Captain Donnithorne entered the dairy and spoke to her; but it was not at all a distressed blush, for it was inwreathed with smiles and dimples, and with sparkles from under long curled dark eyelashes; and while her aunt was discoursing to him about the limited amount of milk that was to be spared for butter and cheese so long as the calves were not all weaned, and a large quantity but inferior quality of milk yielded by the short-horn, which had been bought on experiment, together with other matters which must be interesting to a young gentleman who would one day be a landlord, Hetty tossed and patted her pound of butter with quite a self-possessed, coquettish air, slily conscious that no turn of her head was lost.

There are various orders of beauty, causing men to make fools of themselves in various styles, from the desperate to the sheepish; but there is one order of beauty which seems made to turn the heads not only of men, but of all intelligent mammals, even of women. It is a beauty like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills, or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief — a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you. Hetty Sorrel's was that sort of beauty. Her aunt, Mrs Poyser, who professed to despise all personal attractions, and intended to be the severest of mentors, continually gazed at Hetty's charms by the sly, fascinated in spite of herself; and after administering such a scolding as naturally flowed from her anxiety to do well by her husband's niece — who had no mother of her own to scold her, poor thing! — she would often confess to her husband, when they were safe out of hearing, that she firmly believed 'the naughtier the little huzzy behaved, the prettier she looked'.

It is of little use for me to tell you that Hetty's cheek was like a rose-petal, that dimples played about her pouting lips, that her large dark eyes hid a soft roguishness under their long lashes, and that her curly hair, though all pushed back under her round cap while she was at work, stole back in dark delicate rings on her forehead, and about her white shell-like ears; it is of little use for me to say how lovely was the contour of her pink-and-white neckerchief, tucked into her low plum-coloured stuff boddice, or how the linen butter-making apron, with its bib, seemed a thing to be imitated in silk by duchesses, since it fell in such charming lines, or how her brown stockings and thick-soled buckled shoes lost all that clumsiness which they must certainly have had when empty of her foot and ankle; – of little use, unless you have seen a woman who affected you as Hetty affected her beholders, for otherwise, though you might conjure up the image of a lovely woman, she would not in the least resemble that distracting kitten-like maiden. I might mention all the divine charms of a bright spring day, but if you had never in your life utterly forgotten yourself in straining your eyes after the mounting lark, or in wandering through the still lanes when the fresh-opened blossoms fill them with a sacred silent beauty like that of fretted aisles, where would be the use of my descriptive catalogue? I could never make you know what I meant by a bright spring day. Hetty's was a spring-tide beauty; it was the beauty of young frisking things, round-limbed, gambolling, circumventing you by a false air of innocence — the innocence of a young star-browed calf, for example, that, being inclined for a promenade out of bounds, leads you a severe steeple-chase over hedge and ditch, and only comes to a stand in the middle of a bog.

And they are the prettiest attitudes and movements into which a pretty girl is thrown in making up butter — tossing movements that give a charming curve to the arm, and a sideward inclination of the round white neck; little patting and rolling movements with the palm of the hand, and nice adaptations and finishings which cannot at all be effected without a great play of the pouting mouth and the dark eyes. And then the

butter itself seems to communicate a fresh charm — it is so pure, so sweet-scented; it is turned off the mould with such a beautiful firm surface, like marble in a pale yellow light! Moreover, Hetty was particularly clever at making up the butter; it was the one performance of hers that her aunt allowed to pass without severe criticism; so she handled it with all the grace that belongs to mastery.

'I hope you will be ready for a great holiday on the thirtieth of July, Mrs Poyser,' said Captain Donnithorne, when he had sufficiently admired the dairy, and given several improvised opinions on Swede turnips and short-horns. 'You know what is to happen then, and I shall expect you to be one of the guests who come earliest and leave latest. Will you promise me your hand for two dances, Miss Hetty? If I don't get your promise now, I know I shall hardly have a chance, for all the smart young farmers will take care to secure you.'

Hetty smiled and blushed, but before she could answer, Mrs Poyser interposed, scandalized at the mere suggestion that the young squire could be excluded by any meaner partners.

'Indeed, sir, you are very kind to take that notice of her. And I'm sure, whenever you're pleased to dance with her, she'll be proud and thankful, if she stood still all the rest o' th' evening.'

'Oh no, no, that would be too cruel to all the other young fellows who can dance. But you will promise me two dances, won't you?' the Captain continued, determined to make Hetty look at him and speak to him.

Hetty dropped the prettiest little curtsy, and stole a half-shy, half-coquettish glance at him as she said –

'Yes, thank you, sir.'

'And you must bring all your children, you know, Mrs Poyser; your little Totty, as well as the boys. I want all the youngest children on the estate to be there — all those who will be fine young men and women when I'm a bald old fellow.'

'Oh dear, sir, that 'ull be a long time first,' said Mrs Poyser, quite overcome at the young squire's speaking so lightly of himself, and thinking how her husband would be interested in hearing her recount this remarkable specimen of high-born humour. The Captain was thought to be 'very full of his jokes', and was a great favourite throughout the estate on account of his free manners. Every tenant was quite sure things would be different when the reins got into his hands — there was to be a millennial abundance[3] of new gates, allowances of lime, and returns of ten per cent.

'But where is Totty to-day?' he said. 'I want to see her.'

'Where *is* the little un, Hetty?' said Mrs Poyser. 'She came in here not long ago.'

'I don't know. She went into the brewhouse to Nancy, I think.'

The proud mother, unable to resist the temptation to show her Totty, passed at once into the back-kitchen, in search of her, not, however, without misgivings lest something should have happened to render her person and attire unfit for presentation.

'And do you carry the butter to market when you've made it?' said the Captain to Hetty, meanwhile.

'Oh no, sir; not when it's so heavy: I'm not strong enough to carry it. Alick takes it on horseback.'

'No, I'm sure your pretty arms were never meant for such heavy weights. But you go out a walk sometimes these pleasant evenings, don't you? Why don't you have a walk in the Chase sometimes, now it's so green and pleasant? I hardly ever see you anywhere except at home and at church.'

'Aunt doesn't like me to go a-walking only when I'm going somewhere,' said Hetty. 'But I go through the Chase sometimes.'

'And don't you ever go to see Mrs Best, the housekeeper? I think I saw you once in the housekeeper's room.'

'It isn't Mrs Best, it's Mrs Pomfret, the lady's maid, as I go to see. She's teaching me tent-stitch and the lace-mending. I'm going to tea with her to-morrow afternoon.'

The reason why there had been space for this *tête-à-tête* can only be known by looking into the back-kitchen, where Totty had been discovered rubbing a stray blue-bag[4] against her nose, and in the same moment allowing some liberal indigo drops to fall on her afternoon pinafore. But now she appeared holding her mother's hand — the end of her round nose rather shiny from a recent and hurried application of soap and water.

'Here she is!' said the Captain, lifting her up and setting her on the low stone shelf. 'Here's Totty! By the by, what's her other name? She wasn't christened Totty.'

'Oh, sir, we call her sadly out of her name. Charlotte's her christened name. It's a name i' Mr Poyser's family: his grandmother was named Charlotte. But we began with calling her Lotty, and now it's got to Totty. To be sure it's more like a name for a dog than a Christian child.'

'Totty's a capital name. Why, she looks like a Totty. Has she got a pocket on?' said the Captain, feeling in

his own waistcoat pockets.

Totty immediately with great gravity lifted up her frock, and showed a tiny pink pocket at present in a state of collapse.

‘It dot notin in it,’ she said, as she looked down at it very earnestly.

‘No! what a pity! such a pretty pocket. Well, I think I’ve got some things in mine that will make a pretty jingle in it. Yes! I declare I’ve got five little round silver things, and hear what a pretty noise they make in Totty’s pink pocket.’ Here he shook the pocket with the five sixpences in it, and Totty showed her teeth and wrinkled her nose in great glee; but, divining that there was nothing more to be got by staying, she jumped off the shelf and ran away to jingle her pocket in the hearing of Nancy, while her mother called after her, ‘Oh for shame, you naughty gell! not to thank the Captain for what he’s given you. I’m sure, sir, it’s very kind of you; but she’s spoiled shameful; her father won’t have her said nay in anything, and there’s no managing her. It’s being the youngest, and th’ only gell.’

‘Oh, she’s a funny little fatty; I wouldn’t have her different. But I must be going now, for I suppose the Rector is waiting for me.’

With a ‘good-bye’, a bright glance, and a bow to Hetty, Arthur left the dairy. But he was mistaken in imagining himself waited for. The Rector had been so much interested in his conversation with Dinah, that he would not have chosen to close it earlier; and you shall hear now what they had been saying to each other.

CHAPTER VIII

A Vocation

Dinah, who had risen when the gentlemen came in, but still kept hold of the sheet she was mending, curtsied respectfully when she saw Mr Irwine looking at her and advancing towards her. He had never yet spoken to her, or stood face to face with her, and her first thought, as her eyes met his, was, 'What a well-favoured countenance! Oh that the good seed might fall on that soil,[1] for it would surely flourish.' The agreeable impression must have been mutual, for Mr Irwine bowed to her with a benignant deference, which would have been equally in place if she had been the most dignified lady of his acquaintance.

'You are only a visitor in this neighbourhood, I think?' were his first words, as he seated himself opposite to her.

'No, sir, I come from Snowfield, in Stonyshire. But my aunt was very kind, wanting me to have rest from my work there, because I'd been ill, and she invited me to come and stay with her for a while.'

'Ah, I remember Snowfield very well; I once had occasion to go there. It's a dreary bleak place. They were building a cotton-mill there; but that's many years ago now: I suppose the place is a good deal changed by the employment that mill must have brought.'

'It *is* changed so far as the mill has brought people there, who get a livelihood for themselves by working in it, and make it better for the tradesfolks. I work in it myself, and have reason to be grateful, for thereby I have enough and to spare. But it's still a bleak place, as you say, sir — very different from this country.'

'You have relations living there probably, so that you are attached to the place as your home?'

'I had an aunt there once; she brought me up, for I was an orphan. But she was taken away seven years ago, and I have no other kindred that I know of, besides my aunt Poyser, who is very good to me, and would have me come and live in this country, which to be sure is a good land, wherein they eat bread without scarceness.[2] But I'm not free to leave Snowfield, where I was first planted, and have grown deep into it, like the small grass on the hill-top.'

'Ah, I daresay you have many religious friends and companions there; you are a Methodist — a Wesleyan,[3]1 think?'

'Yes, my aunt at Snowfield belonged to the Society, and I have cause to be thankful for the privileges I have had thereby from my earliest childhood.'

'And have you been long in the habit of preaching? — for I understand you preached at Hayslope last night.'

'I first took to the work four years since, when I was twenty-one.'

'Your Society sanctions women's preaching, then?'

'It doesn't forbid them, sir, when they've a clear call to the work, and when their ministry is owned by the conversion of sinners, and the strengthening of God's people. Mrs Fletcher, as you may have heard about, was the first woman to preach in the Society, I believe, before she was married, when she was Miss Bosanquet;[4] and Mr Wesley approved of her undertaking the work. She had a great gift, and there are many others now living who are precious fellow-helpers in the work of the ministry. I understand there's been voices raised against it in the Society of late, but I cannot but think their counsel will come to nought. It isn't for men to make channels for God's Spirit, as they make channels for the water-courses, and say, "Flow here, but flow not there."'

'But don't you find some danger among your people – 1 don't mean to say that it is so with you, far from it — but don't you find sometimes that both men and women fancy themselves channels for God's Spirit, and are quite mistaken, so that they set about a work for which they are unfit, and bring holy things into contempt?'

'Doubtless it is so sometimes; for there have been evil-doers among us who have sought to deceive the brethren, and some there are who deceive their own selves. But we are not without discipline and correction to put a check upon these things. There's a very strict order kept among us, and the brethren and sisters watch for each other's souls as they that must give account. They don't go every one his own way[5] and say, "Am I my brother's keeper?" '[6]

'But tell me — if I may ask, and I am really interested in knowing it — how you first came to think of

preaching?'

'Indeed, sir, I didn't think of it at all — I'd been used from the time I was sixteen to talk to the little children and teach them, and sometimes I had had my heart enlarged to speak in class, and was much drawn out in prayer with the sick. But I had felt no call to preach; for when I'm not greatly wrought upon, I'm too much given to sit still and keep by myself; it seems as if I could sit silent all day long with the thought of God overflowing my soul — as the pebbles lie bathed in the Willow Brook. For thoughts are so great — aren't they, sir? They seem to lie upon us like a deep flood; and it's my besetment[7] to forget where I am and everything about me, and lose myself in thoughts that I could give no account of, for I could neither make a beginning nor ending of them in words. That was my way as long as I can remember; but sometimes it seemed as if speech came to me without any will of my own, and words were given to me that came out as the tears come, because our hearts are full and we can't help it. And those were always times of great blessing, though I had never thought it could be so with me before a congregation of people. But, sir, we are led on, like the little children, by a way that we know not. I was called to preach quite suddenly, and since then I have never been left in doubt about the work that was laid upon me.'

'But tell me the circumstances — just how it was, the very day you began to preach.'

'It was one Sunday I walked with brother Marlowe, who was an aged man, one of the local preachers, all the way to Hetton-Deeps — that's a village where the people get their living by working in the lead-mines, and where there's no church nor preacher, but they live like sheep without a shepherd. It's better than twelve miles from Snowfield, so we set out early in the morning, for it was summer-time; and I had a wonderful sense of the Divine love as we walked over the hills, where there's no trees, you know, sir, as there is here, to make the sky look smaller, but you see the heavens stretched out like a tent, and you feel the everlasting arms around you. But before we got to Hetton, brother Marlowe was seized with a dizziness that made him afraid of falling, for he overworked himself sadly, at his years, in watching and praying, and walking so many miles to speak the Word, as well as carrying on his trade of linen-weaving. And when we got to the village, the people were expecting him, for he'd appointed the time and the place when he was there before, and such of them as cared to hear the Word of Life were assembled on a spot where the cottages was thickest, so as others might be drawn to come. But he felt as he couldn't stand up to preach, and he was forced to lie down in the first of the cottages we came to. So I went to tell the people, thinking we'd go into one of the houses, and I would read and pray with them. But as I passed along by the cottages and saw the aged and trembling women at the doors, and the hard looks of the men, who seemed to have their eyes no more filled with the sight of the Sabbath morning than if they had been dumb oxen that never looked up to the sky, I felt a great movement in my soul, and I trembled as if I was shaken by a strong spirit entering into my weak body. And I went to where the little flock of people was gathered together, and stepped on the low wall that was built against the green hillside, and I spoke the words that were given to me abundantly.[8] And they all came round me out of all the cottages, and many wept over their sins, and have since been joined to the Lord. That was the beginning of my preaching, sir, and I've preached ever since.'

Dinah had let her work fall during this narrative, which she uttered in her usual simple way, but with that sincere, articulate, thrilling treble, by which she always mastered her audience. She stooped now to gather up her sewing, and then went on with it as before. Mr Irwine was deeply interested. He said to himself, 'He must be a miserable prig who would act the pedagogue here: one might as well go and lecture the trees for growing in their own shape.'

'And you never feel any embarrassment from the sense of your youth — that you are a lovely young woman on whom men's eyes are fixed?'[9] he said aloud.

'No, I've no room for such feelings, and I don't believe the people ever take notice about that. I think, sir, when God makes His presence felt through us, we are like the burning bush: Moses never took any heed what sort of bush it was — he only saw the brightness of the Lord.[10] I've preached to as rough ignorant people as can be in the villages about Snowfield — men that looked very hard and wild; but they never said an uncivil word to me, and often thanked me kindly as they made way for me to pass through the midst of them.'

'*That* I can believe — that I can well believe,' said Mr Irwine, emphatically. 'And what did you think of your hearers last night, now? Did you find them quiet and attentive?'

'Very quiet, sir; but I saw no signs of any great work upon them, except in a young girl named Bessy Cranage, towards whom my heart yearned greatly, when my eyes first fell on her blooming youth, given up to folly and vanity. I had some private talk and prayer with her afterwards, and I trust her heart is touched. But I've noticed, that in these villages where the people lead a quiet life among the green pastures and the still waters,[11] tilling the ground and tending the cattle, there's a strange dead-ness to the Word, as different as can be from the great towns, like Leeds, where I once went to visit a holy woman who preaches there.

It's wonderful how rich is the harvest of souls up those high-walled streets, where you seemed to walk as in a prison-yard, and the ear is deafened with the sounds of worldly toil. I think maybe it is because the promise is sweeter when this life is so dark and weary, and the soul gets more hungry when the body is ill at ease.'

'Why, yes, our farm-labourers are not easily roused. They take life almost as slowly as the sheep and cows. But we have some intelligent workmen about here. I daresay you know the Bedes; Seth Bede, by the by, is a Methodist.'

'Yes, I know Seth well, and his brother Adam a little. Seth is a gracious young man — sincere and without offence; and Adam is like the patriarch Joseph,[12] for his great skill and knowledge, and the kindness he shows to his brother and his parents.'

'Perhaps you don't know the trouble that has just happened to them? Their father, Matthias Bede, was drowned in the Willow Brook last night, not far from his own door. I'm going now to see Adam.'

'Ah, their poor aged mother!' said Dinah, dropping her hands, and looking before her with pitying eyes, as if she saw the object of her sympathy. 'She will mourn heavily; for Seth has told me she's of an anxious troubled heart. I must go and see if I can give her any help.'

As she rose and was beginning to fold up her work, Captain Donnithorne, having exhausted all plausible pretexts for remaining among the milk-pans, came out of the dairy, followed by Mrs Poyser. Mr Irwine now rose also, and, advancing towards Dinah, held out his hand, and said –

'Good-by. I hear you are going away soon; but this will not be the last visit you will pay your aunt — so we shall meet again, I hope.'

His cordiality towards Dinah set all Mrs Poyser's anxieties at rest, and her face was brighter than usual, as she said –

'I've never asked after Mrs Irwine and the Miss Irwines, sir; I hope they're as well as usual.'

'Yes, thank you, Mrs Poyser, except that Miss Anne has one of her bad headaches to-day. By the by, we all liked that nice cream-cheese you sent us — my mother especially.'

'I'm very glad, indeed, sir. It is but seldom I make one, but I remembered Mrs Irwine was fond of 'em. Please to give my duty to her, and to Miss Kate and Miss Anne. They've never been to look at my poultry this long while, and I've got some beautiful speckled chickens, black and white, as Miss Kate might like to have some of amongst hers.'

'Well, I'll tell her; she must come and see them. Good-by,' said the Rector, mounting his horse.

'Just ride slowly on, Irwine,' said Captain Donnithorne, mounting also. 'I'll overtake you in three minutes. I'm only going to speak to the shepherd about the whelps. Good-by, Mrs Poyser; tell your husband I shall come and have a long talk with him soon.'

Mrs Poyser curtsied duly, and watched the two horses until they had disappeared from the yard, amidst great excitement on the part of the pigs and the poultry, and under the furious indignation of the bull-dog, who performed a Pyrrhic dance,[13] that every moment seemed to threaten the breaking of his chain. Mrs Poyser delighted in this noisy exit; it was a fresh assurance to her that the farmyard was well guarded, and that no loiterers could enter unobserved; and it was not until the gate had closed behind the Captain that she turned into the kitchen again, where Dinah stood with her bonnet in her hand, waiting to speak to her aunt, before she set out for Lisbeth Bede's cottage.

Mrs Poyser, however, though she noticed the bonnet, deferred remarking on it until she had disburdened herself of her surprise at Mr Irwine's behaviour.

'Why, Mr Irwine wasn't angry, then? What did he say to you, Dinah? Didn't he scold you for preaching?'

'No, he was not at all angry; he was very friendly to me. I was quite drawn out to speak to him; I hardly know how, for I had always thought of him as a worldly Sadducee.[14] But his countenance is as pleasant as the morning sunshine.'

'Pleasant! and what else did y' expect to find him but pleasant?' said Mrs Poyser, impatiently, resuming her knitting. 'I should think his countenance *is* pleasant indeed! and him a gentleman born, and's got a mother like a picter. You may go the country round, and not find such another woman turned sixty-six. It's summat-like to see such a man as that i' the desk of a Sunday! As I say to Poyser, it's like looking at a full crop o' wheat, or a pasture with a fine dairy o' cows in it; it makes you think the world's comfortable-like. But as for such creaturs as you Methodisses run after, I'd as soon go to look at a lot o' bare-ribbed runts on a common.[15] Fine folks they are to tell you what's right, as look as if they'd never tasted nothing better than bacon-sword and sour-cake[16] i' their lives. But what did Mr Irwine say to you about that fool's trick o' preaching on the Green?'

'He only said he'd heard of it; he didn't seem to feel any displeasure about it. But, dear aunt, don't think any more about that. He told me something that I'm sure will cause you sorrow, as it does me. Thias Bede

was drowned last night in the Willow Brook, and I'm thinking that the aged mother will be greatly in need of comfort. Perhaps I can be of use to her, so I have fetched my bonnet and am going to set out.'

'Dear heart, dear heart! But you must have a cup o' tea first, child,' said Mrs Poyser, falling at once from the key of B with five sharps to the frank and genial C.[17] 'The kettle's boiling – we'll have it ready in a minute; and the young uns 'ull be in and wanting theirs directly. I'm quite willing you should go and see th' old woman, for you're one as is allays welcome in trouble, Methodist or no Methodist; but, for the matter o' that, it's the flesh and blood folks are made on as makes the difference. Some cheeses are made o' skimmed milk and some o' new milk, and it's no matter what you call 'em, you may tell which is which by the look and the smell. But as to Thias Bede, he's better out o' the way nor in — God forgi' me for saying so — for he's done little this ten year but make trouble for them as belonged to him; and I think it 'ud be well for you to take a little bottle o' rum for th' old woman, for I daresay she's got never a drop o' nothing to comfort her inside. Sit down, child, and be easy, for you shan't stir out till you've had a cup o' tea, and so I tell you.'

During the latter part of this speech, Mrs Poyser had been reaching down the tea-things from the shelves, and was on her way towards the pantry for the loaf (followed close by Totty, who had made her appearance on the rattling of the tea-cups), when Hetty came out of the dairy relieving her tired arms by lifting them up, and clasping her hands at the back of her head.

'Molly,' she said, rather languidly, 'just run out and get me a bunch of dock-leaves:[18] the butter's ready to pack up now.'

'D' you hear what's happened, Hetty?' said her aunt.

'No; how should I hear anything?' was the answer, in a pettish tone.

'Not as you'd care much, I daresay, if you did hear; for you're too feather-headed to mind if everybody was dead, so as you could stay up-stairs a-dressing yourself for two hours by the clock. But anybody besides yourself 'ud mind about such things happening to them as think a deal more of you than you deserve. But Adam Bede and all his kin might be drownded for what you'd care — you'd be perking at the glass the next minute.'

'Adam Bede — drowned?' said Hetty, letting her arms fall, and looking rather bewildered, but suspecting that her aunt was as usual exaggerating with a didactic purpose.

'No, my dear, no,' said Dinah, kindly, for Mrs Poyser had passed on to the pantry without deigning more precise information. 'Not Adam. Adam's father, the old man, is drowned. He was drowned last night in the Willow Brook. Mr Irwine has just told me about it.'

'Oh, how dreadful!' said Hetty, looking serious, but not deeply affected; and as Molly now entered with the dock-leaves, she took them silently and returned to the dairy without asking further questions.

CHAPTER IX

Hetty's World

While she adjusted the broad leaves that set off the pale fragrant butter as the primrose is set off by its nest of green, I am afraid Hetty was thinking a great deal more of the looks Captain Donnithorne had cast at her than of Adam and his troubles. Bright, admiring glances from a handsome young gentleman, with white hands, a gold chain, occasional regimentals,[1] and wealth and grandeur immeasurable — those were the warm rays that set poor Hetty's heart vibrating, and playing its little foolish tunes over and over again. We do not hear that Memnon's statue[2] gave forth its melody at all under the rushing of the mightiest wind, or in response to any other influence divine or human than certain shortlived sunbeams of morning; and we must learn to accommodate ourselves to the discovery that some of those cunningly-fashioned instruments called human souls have only a very limited range of music, and will not vibrate in the least under a touch that fills others with tremulous rapture or quivering agony.

Hetty was quite used to the thought that people liked to look at her. She was not blind to the fact that young Luke Britton of Broxton came to Hayslope Church on a Sunday afternoon on purpose that he might see her; and that he would have made much more decided advances if her uncle Poyser, thinking but lightly of a young man whose father's land was so foul as old Luke Britton's, had not forbidden her aunt to encourage him by any civilities. She was aware, too, that Mr Craig, the gardener at the Chase, was over head and ears in love with her, and had lately made unmistakable avowals in luscious strawberries and hyperbolical peas. She knew still better, that Adam Bede — tall, upright, clever, brave Adam Bede — who carried such authority with all the people round about, and whom her uncle was always delighted to see of an evening, saying that 'Adam knew a fine sight more o' the natur o' things than those as thought themselves his betters' — she knew that this Adam, who was often rather stern to other people, and not much given to run after the lasses, could be made to turn pale or red any day by a word or a look from her. Hetty's sphere of comparison was not large, but she couldn't help perceiving that Adam was 'something like' a man; always knew what to say about things, could tell her uncle how to prop the hovel, and had mended the churn in no time; knew, with only looking at it, the value of the chestnut tree that was blown down, and why the damp came in the walls, and what they must do to stop the rats; and wrote a beautiful hand that you could read off, and could do figures in his head — a degree of accomplishment totally unknown among the richest farmers of that country-side. Not at all like that slouching Luke Britton, who, when she once walked with him all the way from Broxton to Hayslope, had only broken silence to remark that the grey goose had begun to lay. And as for Mr Craig, the gardener, he was a sensible man enough, to be sure, but he was knock-kneed, and had a queer sort of sing-song in his talk; moreover, on the most charitable supposition, he must be far on the way to forty.

Hetty was quite certain her uncle wanted her to encourage Adam, and would be pleased for her to marry him. For those were times when there was no rigid demarcation of rank between the farmer and the respectable artisan, and on the home hearth, as well as in the public-house, they might be seen taking their jug of ale together; the farmer having a latent sense of capital, and of weight in parish affairs, which sustained him under his conspicuous inferiority in conversation. Martin Poyser was not a frequenter of public-houses, but he liked a friendly chat over his own home-brewed; and though it was pleasant to lay down the law to a stupid neighbour who had no notion how to make the best of his farm, it was also an agreeable variety to learn something from a clever fellow like Adam Bede. Accordingly, for the last three years — ever since he had superintended the building of the new barn — Adam had always been made welcome at the Hall Farm, especially of a winter evening, when the whole family, in patriarchal fashion, master and mistress, children and servants, were assembled in that glorious kitchen, at well-graduated distances from the blazing fire. And for the last two years, at least, Hetty had been in the habit of hearing her uncle say, 'Adam Bede may be working for wage now, but he'll be a master-man[3] some day, as sure as I sit in this chair. Mester Bürge is in the right on't to want him to go partners and marry his daughter, if it's true what they say; the woman as marries him 'ull have a good take, be't Lady-day[4] or Michaelmas', — a remark which Mrs Poyser always followed up with her cordial assent. 'Ah!' she would say, 'it's all very fine having a ready-made rich man, but may-happen he'll be a ready-made fool; and it's no use filling your pocket full of money if you've got a hole in the corner. It'll do you no good to sit in a spring-cart o' your

own, if you've got a soft to drive you: he'll soon turn you over into the ditch. I allays said I'd never marry a man as had got no brains; for where's the use of a woman having brains of her own if she's tackled to a geek[5] as everybody's a-laughing at? She might as well dress herself fine to sit back'ards on a donkey.'

These expressions, though figurative, sufficiently indicated the bent of Mrs Poyser's mind with regard to Adam; and though she and her husband might have viewed the subject differently if Hetty had been a daughter of their own, it was clear that they would have welcomed the match with Adam for a penniless niece. For what could Hetty have been but a servant elsewhere, if her uncle had not taken her in and brought her up as a domestic help to her aunt, whose health since the birth of Totty had not been equal to more positive labour than the superintendence of servants and children? But Hetty had never given Adam any steady encouragement. Even in the moments when she was most thoroughly conscious of his superiority to her other admirers, she had never brought herself to think of accepting him. She liked to feel that this strong, skilful, keen-eyed man was in her power, and would have been indignant if he had shown the least sign of slipping from under the yoke of her coquettish tyranny, and attaching himself to the gentle Mary Bürge, who would have been grateful enough for the most trifling notice from him. 'Mary Bürge, indeed! such a sallow-faced girl: if she put on a bit of pink ribbon, she looked as yellow as a crow-flower, and her hair was as straight as a hank of cotton.' And always when Adam stayed away for several weeks from the Hall Farm, and otherwise made some show of resistance to his passion as a foolish one, Hetty took care to entice him back into the net by little airs of meekness and timidity, as if she were in trouble at his neglect. But as to marrying Adam, that was a very different affair! There was nothing in the world to tempt her to do that. Her cheeks never grew a shade deeper when his name was mentioned; she felt no thrill when she saw him passing along the causeway by the window, or advancing towards her unexpectedly in the footpath across the meadow; she felt nothing when his eyes rested on her, but the cold triumph of knowing that he loved her, and would not care to look at Mary Bürge: he could no more stir in her the emotions that make the sweet intoxication of young love, than the mere picture of a sun can stir the spring sap in the subtle fibres of the plant. She saw him as he was — a poor man, with old parents to keep, who would not be able, for a long while to come, to give her even such luxuries as she shared in her uncle's house. And Hetty's dreams were all of luxuries: to sit in a carpeted parlour, and always wear white stockings; to have some large beautiful earrings such as were all the fashion; to have Nottingham lace[6] round the top of her gown, and something to make her handkerchief smell nice, like Miss Lydia Donnithorne's when she drew it out at church; and not to be obliged to get up early or be scolded by anybody. She thought, if Adam had been rich and could have given her these things, she loved him well enough to marry him.

But for the last few weeks a new influence had come over Hetty – vague, atmospheric, shaping itself into no self-confessed hopes or prospects, but producing a pleasant narcotic effect, making her tread the ground and go about her work in a sort of dream, unconscious of weight or effort, and showing her all things through a soft, liquid veil, as if she were living not in this solid world of brick and stone, but in a beatified world, such as the sun lights up for us in the waters. Hetty had become aware that Mr Arthur Donnithorne would take a good deal of trouble for the chance of seeing her; that he always placed himself at church so as to have the fullest view of her both sitting and standing; that he was constantly finding reasons for calling at the Hall Farm, and always would contrive to say something for the sake of making her speak to him and look at him. The poor child no more conceived at present the idea that the young squire could ever be her lover, than a baker's pretty daughter in the crowd, whom a young emperor distinguishes by an imperial but admiring smile, conceives that she shall be made empress. But the baker's daughter goes home and dreams of the handsome young emperor, and perhaps weighs the flour amiss while she is thinking what a heavenly lot it must be to have him for a husband: and so poor Hetty had got a face and a presence haunting her waking and sleeping dreams; bright, soft glances had penetrated her, and suffused her life with a strange, happy languor. The eyes that shed those glances were really not half so fine as Adam's, which sometimes looked at her with a sad, beseeching tenderness; but they had found a ready medium in Hetty's little silly imagination, whereas Adam's could get no entrance through that atmosphere. For three weeks, at least, her inward life had consisted of little else than living through in memory the looks and words Arthur had directed towards her — of little else than recalling the sensations with which she heard his voice outside the house, and saw him enter, and became conscious that his eyes were fixed on her, and then became conscious that a tall figure, looking down on her with eyes that seemed to touch her, was coming nearer in clothes of beautiful texture, with an odour like that of a flower-garden borne on the evening breeze. Foolish thoughts! but all this happened, you must remember, nearly sixty years ago, and Hetty was quite uneducated — a simple farmer's girl, to whom a gentleman with a white hand was dazzling as an Olympian god. Until to-day, she had never looked farther into the future than to the next time Captain Donnithorne would come to the Farm, or the next Sunday when she should see him at church; but now she thought, perhaps he would try to meet her when she went to the Chase to-morrow — and if he

should speak to her, and walk a little way, when nobody was by! That had never happened yet; and now her imagination, instead of retracing the past, was busy fashioning what would happen to-morrow — whereabout in the Chase she should see him coming towards her, how she should put her new rose-coloured ribbon on, which he had never seen, and what he would say to her to make her return his glance — a glance which she would be living through in her memory, over and over again, all the rest of the day.

In this state of mind, how could Hetty give any feeling to Adam's troubles, or think much about poor old Thias being drowned? Young souls, in such pleasant delirium as hers, are as unsympathetic as butterflies sipping nectar; they are isolated from all appeals by a barrier of dreams — by invisible looks and impalpable arms.

While Hetty's hands were busy packing up the butter, and her head filled with these pictures of the morrow, Arthur Donnithorne, riding by Mr Irwine's side towards the valley of the Willow Brook, had also certain indistinct anticipations, running as an under-current in his mind while he was listening to Mr Irwine's account of Dinah; — indistinct, yet strong enough to make him feel rather conscious when Mr Irwine suddenly said –

'What fascinated you so in Mrs Poyser's dairy, Arthur? Have you become an amateur of damp quarries and skimming-dishes?'[7]

Arthur knew the Rector too well to suppose that a clever invention would be of any use, so he said, with his accustomed frankness –

'No, I went to look at the pretty butter-maker, Hetty Sorrel. She's a perfect Hebe;[8] and if I were an artist, I would paint her. It's amazing what pretty girls one sees among the farmers' daughters, when the men are such clowns. That common round red face one sees sometimes in the men — all cheek and no features, like Martin Poyser's — comes out in the women of the family as the most charming phiz[9] imaginable.'

'Well, I have no objection to your contemplating Hetty in an artistic light, but I must not have you feeding her vanity, and filling her little noddle with the notion that she's a great beauty, attractive to fine gentlemen, or you will spoil her for a poor man's wife — honest Craig's, for example, whom I have seen bestowing soft glances on her. The little puss seems already to have airs enough to make a husband as miserable as it's a law of nature for a quiet man to be when he marries a beauty. Apropos of marrying, I hope our friend Adam will get settled, now the poor old man's gone. He will only have his mother to keep in future, and I've a notion that there's a kindness between him and that nice modest girl, Mary Bürge, from something that fell from old Jonathan one day when I was talking to him. But when I mentioned the subject to Adam he looked uneasy, and turned the conversation. I suppose the love-making doesn't run smooth, or perhaps Adam hangs back till he's in a better position. He has independence of spirit enough for two men – rather an excess of pride if anything.'

'That would be a capital match for Adam. He would slip into old Burge's shoes, and make a fine thing of that building business, I'll answer for him. I should like to see him well settled in this parish; he would be ready then to act as my grand-vizier when I wanted one. We could plan no end of repairs and improvements together. I've never seen the girl, though, I think — at least I've never looked at her.'

'Look at her next Sunday at church — she sits with her father on the left of the reading-desk. You needn't look quite so much at Hetty Sorrel then. When I've made up my mind that I can't afford to buy a tempting dog, I take no notice of him, because if he took a strong fancy to me, and looked lovingly at me, the struggle between arithmetic and inclination might become unpleasantly severe. I pique myself on my wisdom there, Arthur, and as an old fellow to whom wisdom has become cheap, I bestow it upon you.'

'Thank you. It may stand me in good stead some day, though I don't know that I have any present use for it. Bless me! how the brook has overflowed. Suppose we have a canter, now we're at the bottom of the hill.'

That is the great advantage of dialogue on horseback; it can be merged any minute into a trot or canter, and one might have escaped from Socrates himself[10] in the saddle. The two friends were free from the necessity of further conversation till they pulled up in the lane behind Adam's cottage.

CHAPTER X

Dinah Visits Lisbeth

At five o'clock Lisbeth came down-stairs with a large key in her hand: it was the key of the chamber where her husband lay dead. Throughout the day, except in her occasional outbursts of wailing grief, she had been in incessant movement, performing the initial duties to her dead with the awe and exactitude that belong to religious rites. She had brought out her little store of bleached linen, which she had for long years kept in reserve for this supreme use. It seemed but yesterday — that time so many midsummers ago, when she had told Thias where this linen lay, that he might be sure and reach it out for her when *she* died, for she was the elder of the two. Then there had been the work of cleansing to the strictest purity every object in the sacred chamber, and of removing from it every trace of common daily occupation. The small window which had hitherto freely let in the frosty moonlight or the warm summer sunrise on the working-man's slumber, must now be darkened with a fair white sheet, for this was the sleep which is as sacred under the bare rafters as in ceiled houses.[1] Lisbeth had even mended a long-neglected and unnoticeable rent in the checkered bit of bed-curtain; for the moments were few and precious now in which she would be able to do the smallest office of respect or love for the still corpse, to which in all her thoughts she attributed some consciousness. Our dead are never dead to us until we have forgotten them: they can be injured by us, they can be wounded; they know all our penitence, all our aching sense that their place is empty, all the kisses we bestow on the smallest relic of their presence. And the aged peasant-woman most of all believes that her dead are conscious. Decent burial was what Lisbeth had been thinking of for herself through years of thrift, with an indistinct expectation that she should know when she was being carried to the churchyard, followed by her husband and her sons; and now she felt as if the greatest work of her life were to be done in seeing that Thias was buried decently before her — under the white thorn, where once, in a dream, she had thought she lay in the coffin, yet all the while saw the sunshine above, and smelt the white blossoms that were so thick upon the thorn the Sunday she went to be churched[2] after Adam was born.

But now she had done everything that could be done to-day in the chamber of death — had done it all herself, with some aid from her sons in lifting, for she would let no one be fetched to help her from the village, not being fond of female neighbours generally; and her favourite Dolly, the old housekeeper at Mr Burge's, who had come to condole with her in the morning as soon as she heard of Thias's death, was too dim-sighted to be of much use. She had locked the door, and now held the key in her hand, as she threw herself wearily into a chair that stood out of its place in the middle of the house floor, where in ordinary times she would never have consented to sit. The kitchen had had none of her attention that day; it was soiled with the tread of muddy shoes, and untidy with clothes and other objects out of place. But what at another time would have been intolerable to Lisbeth's habits of order and cleanliness, seemed to her now just what should be: it was right that things should look strange and disordered and wretched, now the old man had come to his end in that sad way: the kitchen ought not to look as if nothing had happened. Adam, overcome with the agitations and exertions of the day after his night of hard work, had fallen asleep on a bench in the workshop; and Seth was in the back kitchen making a fire of sticks that he might get the kettle to boil, and persuade his mother to have a cup of tea, an indulgence which she rarely allowed herself.

There was no one in the kitchen when Lisbeth entered and threw herself into the chair. She looked round with blank eyes at the dirt and confusion on which the bright afternoon's sun shone dismally; it was all of a piece with the sad confusion of her mind — that confusion which belongs to the first hours of a sudden sorrow, when the poor human soul is like one who has been deposited sleeping among the ruins of a vast city, and wakes up in dreary amazement, not knowing whether it is the growing or the dying day — not knowing why and whence came this illimitable scene of desolation, or why he too finds himself desolate in the midst of it.

At another time Lisbeth's first thought would have been, 'Where is Adam?' but the sudden death of her husband had restored him in these hours to that first place in her affections which he had held six-and-twenty years ago: she had forgotten his faults as we forget the sorrows of our departed childhood, and thought of nothing but the young husband's kindness and the old man's patience. Her eyes continued to wander blankly until Seth came in and began to remove some of the scattered things, and clear the small round deal table that he might set out his mother's tea upon it.

‘What art goin’ to do?’ she said, rather peevishly.

‘I want thee to have a cup of tea, mother,’ answered Seth, tenderly. ‘It’ll do thee good; and I’ll put two or three of these things away, and make the house look more comfortable.’

‘Comfortable! How canst talk o’ ma’in’ things comfortable? Let a-be, let a-be. There’s no comfort for me no more,’ she went on, the tears coming when she began to speak, ‘now thy poor feyther’s gone, as I’n washed for and mended, an’ got’s victual for him for thirty ’ear, an’ him allays so pleased wi’ iverything I done for him, an’ used to be so handy an’ do the jobs for me when I war ill an’ cumbered wi’ th’ babby, an’ made me the posset[3] an’ brought it up-stairs as proud as could be, an’ carried the lad as war as heavy as two children for five mile an’ Ne’er grumbled, all the way to Warson Wake, ‘cause I wanted to go an’ see my sister, as war dead an’ gone the very next Christmas as e’er come. An’ him to be drownded in the brook as we passed o’er the day we war married an’ come home together, an’ he’d made them lots o’ shelves for me to put my plates an’ things on, an’ showed ’em me as proud as could be, ‘cause he know’d I should be pleased. An’ he war to die an’ me not to know, but to be a-sleepin’ i’ my bed, as if I caredna nought about it. Eh! an’ me to live to see that! An’ us as war young folks once, an’ thought we should do rarely when we war married. Let a-be, lad, let a-be! I wonna ha’ no tay: I carena if I Ne’er ate nor drink no more. When one end o’ th’ bridge tumbles down, where’s th’ use o’ th’ other stannin’? I may’s well die, an’ foller my old man. There’s no knowin’ but he’ll want me.’

Here Lisbeth broke from words into moans, swaying herself backwards and forwards on her chair. Seth, always timid in his behaviour towards his mother, from the sense that he had no influence over her, felt it was useless to attempt to persuade or soothe her, till this passion was past; so he contented himself with tending the back-kitchen fire, and folding up his father’s clothes, which had been hanging out to dry since morning; afraid to move about in the room where his mother was, lest he should irritate her further.

But after Lisbeth had been rocking herself and moaning for some minutes, she suddenly paused, and said aloud to herself –

‘I’ll go an’ see arter Adam, for I canna think where he’s gotten; an’ I want him to go up-stairs wi’ me afore it’s dark, for the minutes to look at the corpse is like the meltin’ snow.’

Seth overheard this, and coming into the kitchen again, as his mother rose from her chair, he said –

‘Adam’s asleep in the workshop, mother. Thee’dst better not wake him. He was o’erwrought with work and trouble.’

‘Wake him? Who’s a-goin’ to wake him? I shanna wake him wi’ lookin’ at him. I hanna seen the lad this two hour — I’d welly forgot as he’d e’er growed up from a babby when’s feyther carried him.’

Adam was seated on a rough bench, his head supported by his arm, which rested from the shoulder to the elbow on the long planing-table in the middle of the workshop. It seemed as if he had sat down for a few minutes’ rest, and had fallen asleep without slipping from his first attitude of sad, fatigued thought. His face, unwashed since yesterday, looked pallid and clammy; his hair was tossed shaggily about his forehead, and his closed eyes had the sunken look which follows upon watching and sorrow. His brow was knit, and his whole face had an expression of weariness and pain. Gyp was evidently uneasy, for he sat on his haunches resting his nose on his master’s stretched-out leg, and dividing the time between licking the hand that hung listlessly down, and glancing with a listening air towards the door. The poor dog was hungry and restless, but would not leave his master, and was waiting impatiently for some change in the scene. It was owing to this feeling on Gyp’s part, that when Lisbeth came into the workshop, and advanced towards Adam as noiselessly as she could, her intention not to awake him was immediately defeated; for Gyp’s excitement was too great to find vent in anything short of a sharp bark, and in a moment Adam opened his eyes and saw his mother standing before him. It was not very unlike his dream, for his sleep had been little more than living through again, in a fevered delirious way, all that had happened since daybreak, and his mother with her fretful grief was present to him through it all. The chief difference between the reality and the vision was, that in his dream Hetty was continually coming before him in bodily presence — strangely mingling herself as an actor in scenes with which she had nothing to do. She was even by the Willow Brook; she made his mother angry by coming into the house; and he met her with her smart clothes quite wet through, as he walked in the rain to Treddleston, to tell the coroner. But wherever Hetty came, his mother was sure to follow soon; and when he opened his eyes, it was not at all startling to see her standing near him.

‘Eh, my lad, my lad!’ Lisbeth burst out immediately, her wailing impulse returning, for grief in its freshness feels the need of associating its loss and its lament with every change of scene and incident, ‘thee’st got nobody now but thy old mother to torment thee and be a burden to thee: thy poor feyther ’ull Ne’er anger thee no more; an’ thy mother may’s well go arter him — the sooner the better — for I’m no good to nobody now. One old coat ’ull do to patch another, but it’s good for nought else. Thee’dst like to ha’

a wife to mend thy clothes an' get thy victual, better nor thy old mother. An' I shall be nought but cumber,[4] a-sittin' i' th' chimney-corner. (Adam winced and moved uneasily; he dreaded, of all things, to hear his mother speak of Hetty.) But if thy feyther had lived, he'd Ne'er ha' wanted me to go to make room for another, for he could no more ha' done wi'out me nor one side o' the scissars can do wi'out th' other. Eh, we should ha' been both flung away together, an' then I shouldna ha' seen this day, an' one buryin' 'ud ha' done for us both.'

Here Lisbeth paused, but Adam sat in pained silence: he could not speak otherwise than tenderly to his mother to-day; but he could not help being irritated by this plaint. It was not possible for poor Lisbeth to know how it affected Adam, any more than it is possible for a wounded dog to know how his moans affect the nerves of his master. Like all complaining women, she complained in the expectation of being soothed, and when Adam said nothing, she was only prompted to complain more bitterly.

'I know thee couldst do better wi'out me, for thee couldst go where thee likedst, an' marry them as thee likedst. But I donna want to say thee nay, let thee bring home who thee wut; I'd Ne'er open my lips to find faut, for when folks is old an' o' no use, they may think theirsens well off to get the bit an' the sup, though they'n to swallow ill words wi't. An' if thee'st set thy heart on a lass as'll bring thee nought and waste all, when thee mightst ha' them as 'ud make a man on thee, I'll say nought, now thy feyther's dead an' drownded, for I'm no better nor an old haft[5] when the blade's gone.'

Adam, unable to bear this any longer, rose silently from the bench, and walked out of the workshop into the kitchen. But Lisbeth followed him.

'Thee wutna go up-stairs an' see thy feyther, then? I'n done everythin' now, an' he'd like thee to go an' look at him, for he war allays so pleased when thee wast mild to him.'

Adam turned round at once, and said, 'Yes, mother; let us go up-stairs. Come, Seth, let us go together.'

They went up-stairs, and for five minutes all was silence. Then the key was turned again, and there was a sound of footsteps on the stairs. But Adam did not come down again; he was too weary and worn-out to encounter more of his mother's querulous grief, and he went to rest on his bed. Lisbeth no sooner entered the kitchen and sat down than she threw her apron over her head, and began to cry and moan, and rock herself as before. Seth thought, 'She will be quieter by-and-by, now we have been up-stairs'; and he went into the back-kitchen again, to tend his little fire, hoping that he should presently induce her to have some tea.

Lisbeth had been rocking herself in this way for more than five minutes, giving a low moan with every forward movement of her body, when she suddenly felt a hand placed gently on hers, and a sweet treble voice said to her, 'Dear sister, the Lord has sent me to see if I can be a comfort to you.'

Lisbeth paused, in a listening attitude, without removing her apron from her face. The voice was strange to her. Could it be her sister's spirit come back to her from the dead after all those years? She trembled, and dared not look.

Dinah, believing that this pause of wonder was in itself a relief for the sorrowing woman, said no more just yet, but quietly took off her bonnet, and then, motioning silence to Seth, who, on hearing her voice, had come in with a beating heart, laid one hand on the back of Lisbeth's chair, and leaned over her, that she might be aware of a friendly presence.

Slowly Lisbeth drew down her apron, and timidly she opened her dim dark eyes. She saw nothing at first but a face — a pure, pale face, with loving grey eyes, and it was quite unknown to her. Her wonder increased; perhaps it *was* an angel. But in the same instant Dinah had laid her hand on Lisbeth's again, and the old woman looked down at it. It was a much smaller hand than her own, but it was not white and delicate, for Dinah had never worn a glove in her life, and her hand bore the traces of labour from her childhood upwards. Lisbeth looked earnestly at the hand for a moment, and then, fixing her eyes again on Dinah's face, said, with something of restored courage, but in a tone of surprise –

'Why, ye're a workin' woman!'

'Yes, I am Dinah Morris, and I work in the cotton-mill when I am at home.'

'Ah!' said Lisbeth slowly, still wondering; 'ye corned in so light, like the shadow on the wall, an' spoke i' my ear, as I thought ye might be a sperrit. Ye've got a' most the face o' one as is a-sittin' on the grave i' Adam's new Bible.'

'I come from the Hall Farm now. You know Mrs Poyser – she's my aunt, and she has heard of your great affliction, and is very sorry; and I'm come to see if I can be any help to you in your trouble; for I know your sons Adam and Seth, and I know you have no daughter; and when the clergyman told me how the hand of God was heavy upon you, my heart went out towards you, and I felt a command to come and be to you in the place of a daughter in this grief, if you will let me.'

'Ah! I know who y' are now; y' are a Methody, like Seth; he's tould me on you,' said Lisbeth, fretfully, her

overpowering sense of pain returning, now her wonder was gone. ‘Ye’ll make it out as trouble’s a good thing, like *be* allays does. But where’s the use o’ talkin’ to me a-that’n? Ye canna make the smart less wi’ talkin’. Ye’ll Ne’er make me believe as it’s better for me not to ha’ my old man die in’s bed, if he must die, an’ ha’ the parson to pray by him, an’ me to sit by him, an’ tell him Ne’er to mind th’ ill words I’ve gi’en him sometimes when I war angered, an’ to gi’ him a bit an’ a sup, as long as a bit an’ a sup he’d swallow. But eh! to die i’ the cold water, an’ us close to him, an’ Ne’er to know; an’ me a-sleepin’, as if I Ne’er belonged to him no more nor if he’d been a journeyman tramp[6] from nobody knows where!’

Here Lisbeth began to cry and rock herself again; and Dinah said –

‘Yes, dear friend, your affliction is great. It would be hardness of heart to say that your trouble was not heavy to bear. God didn’t send me to you to make light of your sorrow, but to mourn with you, if you will let me. If you had a table spread for a feast, and was making merry with your friends, you would think it was kind to let me come and sit down and rejoice with you, because you’d think I should like to share those good things; but I should like better to share in your trouble and your labour, and it would seem harder to me if you denied me that. You won’t send me away? You’re not angry with me for coming?’

‘Nay, nay; angered! who said I war angered? It war good on you to come. An’ Seth, why donna ye get her some tay? Ye war in a hurry to get some for me, as had no need, but ye donna think o’ gettin’ ’t for them as wants it. Sit ye down; sit ye down. I thank you kindly for comin’, for it’s little wage ye get by walkin’ through the wet fields to see an old woman like me…. Nay, I’n got no daughter o’ my own — Ne’er had one — an I warna sorry, for they’re poor queechy[7] things, gells is; I allays wanted to ha’ lads, as could fend for theirsens. An’ the lads ’ull be marryin’ – 1 shall ha’ daughters eno’, an’ too many. But now, do ye make the tay as ye like it, for I’n got no taste i’ my mouth this day — it’s all one what I swaller — it’s all got the taste o’ sorrow wi’t.’

Dinah took care not to betray that she had had her tea, and accepted Lisbeth’s invitation very readily, for the sake of persuading the old woman herself to take the food and drink she so much needed after a day of hard work and fasting.

Seth was so happy now Dinah was in the house that he could not help thinking her presence was worth purchasing with a life in which grief incessantly followed upon grief; but the next moment he reproached himself — it was almost as if he were rejoicing in his father’s sad death. Nevertheless the joy of being with Dinah *would* triumph: it was like the influence of climate, which no resistance can overcome. And the feeling even suffused itself over his face so as to attract his mother’s notice, while she was drinking her tea.

‘Thee may’st well talk o’ trouble bein’ a good thing, Seth, for thee thriv’st on’t. Thee look’st as if thee know’dst no more o’ care an’ cumber nor when thee wast a babby a-lyin’ awake i’ th’ cradle. For thee’dst allays lie still wi’ thy eyes open, an’ Adam Ne’er ’ud lie still a minute when he wakened. Thee wast allays like a bag o’ meal as can Ne’er be bruised — though, for the matter o’ that, thy poor feyther war just such another. But *ye’ve* got the same look too’ (here Lisbeth turned to Dinah). ‘I reckon it’s wi’ bein’ a Methody. Not as I’m a-findin’ faut wi’ ye for’t, for ye’ve no call to be frettin’, an’ somehow ye looken sorry too. Eh! well, if the Methodies are fond o’ trouble, they’re like to thrive: it’s a pity they canna ha’t all, an’ take it away from them as donna like it. I could ha’ gi’en ’em plenty; for when I’d gotten my old man I war worreted from morn till night; and now’s he’s gone, I’d be glad for the worst o’er again.’

‘Yes,’ said Dinah, careful not to oppose any feeling of Lisbeth’s, for her reliance, in her smallest words and deeds, on a divine guidance, always issued in that finest woman’s tact which proceeds from acute and ready sympathy — ‘yes; I remember, too, when my dear aunt died, I longed for the sound of her bad cough in the nights, instead of the silence that came when she was gone. But now, dear friend, drink this other cup of tea and eat a little more.’

‘What!’ said Lisbeth, taking the cup, and speaking in a less querulous tone, ‘had ye got no feyther and mother, then, as ye war so sorry about your aunt?’

‘No, I never knew a father or mother; my aunt brought me up from a baby. She had no children, for she was never married, and she brought me up as tenderly as if I’d been her own child.’

‘Eh, she’d fine work wi’ ye, I’ll warrant, bringin’ ye up from a babby, an’ her a lone woman — it’s ill bringin’ up a cade lamb. But I daresay ye warna franzy,[8] for ye look as if ye’d Ne’er been angered i’ your life. But what did ye do when your aunt died, an’ why didna ye come to live in this country, bein’ as Mrs Poyser’s your aunt too?’

Dinah, seeing that Lisbeth’s attention was attracted, told her the story of her early life — how she had been brought up to work hard, and what sort of place Snowfield was, and how many people had a hard life there — all the details that she thought likely to interest Lisbeth. The old woman listened, and forgot to be fretful, unconsciously subject to the soothing influence of Dinah’s face and voice. After a while she was persuaded to let the kitchen be made tidy; for Dinah was bent on this, believing that the sense of order and

quietude around her would help in disposing Lisbeth to join in the prayer she longed to pour forth at her side. Seth, meanwhile, went out to chop wood; for he surmised that Dinah would like to be left alone with his mother.

Lisbeth sat watching her as she moved about in her still quick way, and said at last, 'Ye've got a notion o' cleanin' up. I wouldna mind ha'in ye for a daughter, for ye wouldna spend the lad's wage i' fine clothes an' waste. Ye're not like the lasses o' this country-side. I reckon folks is different at Snowfield from what they are here.'

'They have a different sort of life, many of 'em,' said Dinah; 'they work at different things — some in the mill, and many in the mines, in the villages round about. But the heart of man is the same everywhere, and there are the children of this world and the children of light there as well as elsewhere. But we've many more Methodists there than in this country.'

'Well, I didna know as the Methody women war like ye, for there's Will Maskery's wife, as they say's a big Methody, isna pleasant to look at, at all. I'd as lief look at a tooad. An' I'm thinkin' I wouldna mind if ye'd stay an' sleep here, for I should like to see ye i' th' house i' th' mornin'. But may-happen they'll be lookin' for ye at Mester Poyser's.'

'No,' said Dinah, 'they don't expect me, and I should like to stay, if you'll let me.'

'Well, there's room; I'n got my bed laid i' th' little room o'er the back-kitchen, an' ye can lie beside me. I'd be glad to ha' ye wi' me to speak to i' th' night, for ye've got a nice way o' talkin'. It puts me i' mind o' the swallows as was under the thack[9] last 'ear, when they fust begun to sing low an' soft-like i' th' mornin'. Eh, but my old man war fond o' them birds! an' so war Adam, but they'n Ne'er corned again this 'ear. Happen *they*'re dead too.'

'There,' said Dinah, 'now the kitchen looks tidy, and now, dear mother — for I'm your daughter to-night, you know — I should like you to wash your face and have a clean cap on. Do you remember what David did, when God took away his child from him?[10] While the child was yet alive he fasted and prayed to God to spare it, and he would neither eat nor drink, but lay on the ground all night, beseeching God for the child. But when he knew it was dead, he rose up from the ground and washed and anointed himself, and changed his clothes, and ate and drank; and when they asked him how it was that he seemed to have left off grieving now the child was dead, he said, "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."'

'Eh, that's a true word,' said Lisbeth. 'Yea, my old man wonna come back to me, but I shall go to him — the sooner the better. Well, ye may do as ye like wi' me: there's a clean cap i' that drawer, an' I'll go i' the back-kitchen an' wash my face. An' Seth, thee may'st reach down Adam's new Bible wi' th' picters in, an' she shall read us a chapter. Eh, I like them words — "I shall go to him, but he wonna come back to me."'

Dinah and Seth were both inwardly offering thanks for the greater quietness of spirit that had come over Lisbeth. This was what Dinah had been trying to bring about, through all her still sympathy and absence from exhortation. From her girlhood upwards she had had experience among the sick and the mourning, among minds hardened and shrivelled through poverty and ignorance, and had gained the subtlest perception of the mode in which they could best be touched, and softened into willingness to receive words of spiritual consolation or warning. As Dinah expressed it, 'she was never left to herself; but it was always given her when to keep silence and when to speak'. And do we not all agree to call rapid thought and noble impulse by the name of inspiration? After our subtlest analysis of the mental process, we must still say, as Dinah did, that our highest thoughts and our best deeds are all given to us.

And so there was earnest prayer — there was faith, love, and hope pouring itself forth that evening in the little kitchen. And poor aged fretful Lisbeth, without grasping any distinct idea, without going through any course of religious emotions, felt a vague sense of goodness and love, and of something right lying underneath and beyond all this sorrowing life. She couldn't understand the sorrow; but, for these moments, under the subduing influence of Dinah's spirit, she felt that she must be patient and still.

CHAPTER XI

In the Cottage

It was but half-past four the next morning, when Dinah, tired of lying awake listening to the birds, and watching the growing light through the little window in the garret roof, rose and began to dress herself very quietly, lest she should disturb Lisbeth. But already some one else was astir in the house, and had gone down-stairs, preceded by Gyp. The dog's pattering step was a sure sign that it was Adam who went down; but Dinah was not aware of this, and she thought it was more likely to be Seth, for he had told her how Adam had stayed up working the night before. Seth, however, had only just awakened at the sound of the opening door. The exciting influence of the previous day, heightened at last by Dinah's unexpected presence, had not been counteracted by any bodily weariness, for he had not done his ordinary amount of hard work; and so when he went to bed, it was not till he had tired himself with hours of tossing wakefulness that drowsiness came, and led on a heavier morning sleep than was usual with him.

But Adam had been refreshed by his long rest, and, with his habitual impatience of mere passivity, he was eager to begin the new day, and subdue sadness by his strong will and strong arm. The white mist lay in the valley; it was going to be a bright, warm day, and he would start to work again when he had had his breakfast.

'There's nothing but what's bearable as long as a man can work,' he said to himself: 'the natur o' things doesn't change, though it seems as if one's own life was nothing but change. The square o' four is sixteen, and you must lengthen your lever in proportion to your weight, is as true when a man's miserable as when he's happy; and the best o' working is, it gives you a grip hold o' things outside your own lot.'

As he dashed the cold water over his head and face, he felt completely himself again, and with his black eyes as keen as ever, and his thick black hair all glistening with the fresh moisture, he went into the workshop to look out the wood for his father's coffin, intending that he and Seth should carry it with them to Jonathan Burge's, and have the coffin made by one of the workmen there, so that his mother might not see and hear the sad task going forward at home.

He had just gone into the workshop, when his quick ear detected a light rapid foot on the stairs — certainly not his mother's. He had been in bed and asleep when Dinah had come in, in the evening, and now he wondered whose step this could be. A foolish thought came, and moved him strangely. As if it could be Hetty! She was the last person likely to be in the house. And yet he felt reluctant to go and look, and have the clear proof that it was some one else. He stood leaning on a plank he had taken hold of, listening to sounds which his imagination interpreted for him so pleasantly, that the keen strong face became suffused with a timid tenderness. The light footstep moved about the kitchen, followed by the sound of the sweeping brush, hardly making so much noise as the lightest breeze that chases the autumn leaves along the dusty path; and Adam's imagination saw a dimpled face, with dark bright eyes and roguish smiles, looking backward at this brush, and a rounded figure just leaning a little to clasp the handle. A very foolish thought — it could not be Hetty; but the only way of dismissing such nonsense from his head was to go and see *who* it was, for his fancy only got nearer and nearer to belief while he stood there listening. He loosed the plank, and went to the kitchen door.

'How do you do, Adam Bede?' said Dinah, in her calm treble, pausing from her sweeping, and fixing her mild grave eyes upon him. 'I trust you feel rested and strengthened again to bear the burthen and heat of the day.'[1]

It was like dreaming of the sunshine, and awaking in the moonlight. Adam had seen Dinah several times, but always at the Hall Farm, where he was not very vividly conscious of any woman's presence except Hetty's, and he had only in the last day or two begun to suspect that Seth was in love with her, so that his attention had not hitherto been drawn towards her for his brother's sake. But now her slim figure, her plain black gown, and her pale serene face, impressed him with all the force that belongs to a reality contrasted with a preoccupying fancy. For the first moment or two he made no answer, but looked at her with the concentrated, examining glance which a man gives to an object in which he has suddenly begun to be interested. Dinah, for the first time in her life, felt a painful self-consciousness; there was something in the dark penetrating glance of this strong man so different from the mildness and timidity of his brother Seth. A

faint blush came, which deepened as she wondered at it. This blush recalled Adam from his forgetfulness.

'I was quite taken by surprise; it was very good of you to come and see my mother in her trouble,' he said, in a gentle grateful tone, for his quick mind told him at once how she came to be there. 'I hope my mother was thankful to have you,' he added, wondering rather anxiously what had been Dinah's reception.

'Yes,' said Dinah, resuming her work, 'she seemed greatly comforted after a while, and she's had a good deal of rest in the night, by times. She was fast asleep when I left her.'

'Who was it took the news to the Hall Farm?' said Adam, his thoughts reverting to some one there; he wondered whether *she* had felt anything about it.

'It was Mr Irwine, the clergyman, told me, and my aunt was grieved for your mother when she heard it, and wanted me to come; and so is my uncle, I'm sure, now he's heard it, but he was gone out to Rosseter all yesterday. They'll look for you there as soon as you've got time to go, for there's nobody round that hearth but what's glad to see you.'

Dinah, with her sympathetic divination, knew quite well that Adam was longing to hear if Hetty had said anything about their trouble; she was too rigorously truthful for benevolent invention, but she had contrived to say something in which Hetty was tacitly included. Love has a way of cheating itself consciously, like a child who plays at solitary hide-and-seek; it is pleased with assurances that it all the while disbelieves. Adam liked what Dinah had said so much that his mind was directly full of the next visit he should pay to the Hall Farm, when Hetty would perhaps behave more kindly to him than she had ever done before.

'But you won't be there yourself any longer?' he said to Dinah.

'No, I go back to Snowfield on Saturday, and I shall have to set out to Treddleston early, to be in time for the Oakbourne carrier.[2] So I must go back to the farm to-night, that I may have the last day with my aunt and her children. But I can stay here all to-day, if your mother would like me; and her heart seemed inclined towards me last night.'

'Ah, then, she's sure to want you to-day. If mother takes to people at the beginning, she's sure to get fond of 'em; but she's a strange way of not liking young women. Though, to be sure,' Adam went on, smiling, 'her not liking other young women is no reason why she shouldn't like you.'

Hitherto Gyp had been assisting at this conversation in motionless silence, seated on his haunches, and alternately looking up in his master's face to watch its expression, and observing Dinah's movements about the kitchen. The kind smile with which Adam uttered the last words was apparently decisive with Gyp of the light in which the stranger was to be regarded, and as she turned round after putting aside her sweeping-brush, he trotted towards her, and put up his muzzle against her hand in a friendly way.

'You see Gyp bids you welcome,' said Adam, 'and he's very slow to welcome strangers.'

'Poor dog!' said Dinah, patting the rough grey coat, 'I've a strange feeling about the dumb things as if they wanted to speak, and it was a trouble to 'em because they couldn't. I can't help being sorry for the dogs always, though perhaps there's no need. But they may well have more in them than they know how to make us understand, for we can't say half what we feel, with all our words.'

Seth came down now, and was pleased to find Adam talking with Dinah; he wanted Adam to know how much better she was than all other women. But after a few words of greeting, Adam drew him into the workshop to consult about the coffin, and Dinah went on with her cleaning.

By six o'clock they were all at breakfast with Lisbeth in a kitchen as clean as she could have made it herself. The window and door were open, and the morning air brought with it a mingled scent of southernwood, thyme, and sweetbriar from the patch of garden by the side of the cottage. Dinah did not sit down at first, but moved about, serving the others with the warm porridge and the toasted oat-cake, which she had got ready in the usual way, for she had asked Seth to tell her just what his mother gave them for breakfast. Lisbeth had been unusually silent since she came down-stairs, apparently requiring some time to adjust her ideas to a state of things in which she came down like a lady to find all the work done, and sat still to be waited on. Her new sensations seemed to exclude the remembrance of her grief. At last, after tasting the porridge, she broke silence –

'Ye might ha' made the parridge worse,' she said to Dinah; 'I can ate it wi'out it's turnin' my stomach. It might ha' been a trifle thicker an' no harm, an' I allays putten a sprig o' mint in mysen; but how's ye t' know that? The lads arena like to get folks as '11 make their parridge as I'n made it for 'em; it's well if they get onybody as '11 make parridge at all. But ye might do, wi' a bit o' showin'; for ye're a stirrin' body in a mornin', an' ye've a light heel, an' ye've cleaned th' house well enough for a ma'-shift.'

'Makeshift, mother?' said Adam. 'Why, I think the house looks beautiful. I don't know how it could look better.'

'Thee dostna know? — nay; how's thee to know? Th' men Ne'er know whether the floor's clean or cat-

licked. But thee'lt know when thee gets thy parridge burnt, as it's like enough to be when I'n gi'en o'er makin' it. Thee'lt think thy mother war good for summat then.'

'Dinah,' said Seth, 'do come and sit down now and have your breakfast. We're all served now.'

'Ay, come an' sit ye down — do,' said Lisbeth, 'an' ate a morsel; ye'd need, arter bein' upo' your legs this hour an' half a'ready. Come, then,' she added, in a tone of complaining affection, as Dinah sat down by her side, 'I'll be loath for ye t' go, but ye canna stay much longer, I doubt. I could put up wi' ye i' th' house better nor wi' most folks.'

'I'll stay till to-night if you're willing,' said Dinah. 'I'd stay longer, only I'm going back to Snowfield on Saturday, and I must be with my aunt to-morrow.'

'Eh, I'd Ne'er go back to that country. My old man come from that Stonyshire side, but he left it when he war a young un, an' i' the right on't too; for he said as there war no wood there, an' it 'ud ha' been a bad country for a carpenter.'

'Ah,' said Adam, 'I remember father telling me when I was a little lad, that he made up his mind if ever he moved it should be south'ard. But I'm not so sure about it. Bartle Massey says — and he knows the South — as the northern men are a finer breed than the southern, harder-headed and stronger-bodied, and a deal taller. And then he says, in some o' those counties it's as flat as the back o' your hand, and you can see nothing of a distance, without climbing up the highest trees. I couldn't abide that: I like to go to work by a road that'll take me up a bit of a hill, and see the fields for miles round me, and a bridge, or a town, or a bit of a steeple here and there. It makes you feel the world's a big place, and there's other men working in it with their heads and hands besides yourself.'

'I like th' hills best,' said Seth, 'when the clouds are over your head, and you see the sun shining ever so far off, over the Loamford way, as I've often done o' late, on the stormy days: it seems to me as if that was heaven where there's always joy and sunshine, though this life's dark and cloudy.'

'Oh, I love the Stonyshire side,' said Dinah; 'I shouldn't like to set my face towards the countries where they're rich in corn and cattle, and the ground so level and easy to tread; and to turn my back on the hills where the poor people have to live such a hard life, and the men spend their days in the mines away from the sunlight. It's very blessed on a bleak cold day, when the sky is hanging dark over the hill, to feel the love of God in one's soul, and carry it to the lonely, bare, stone houses, where there's nothing else to give comfort.'

'Eh!' said Lisbeth, 'that's very well for ye to talk, as looks welly like the snowdrop-flowers as ha' lived for days an' days when I'n gethered 'em, wi' nothin' but a drop o' water an' a peep o' daylight; but the hungry foulks had better leave th' hungry country. It makes less mouths for the scant cake. But,' she went on, looking at Adam, 'donna thee talk o' goin' south'ard or north'ard, an' lea vin' thy feyther and mother i' the churchyard, an' goin' to a country as they know nothin' on. I'll Ne'er rest i' my grave if I donna see thee i' the churchyard of a Sunday.'

'Donna fear, mother,' said Adam. 'If I hadna made up my mind not to go, I should ha' been gone before now.'

He had finished his breakfast now, and rose as he was speaking.

'What art goin' to do?' asked Lisbeth. 'Set about thy feyther's coffin?'

'No, mother,' said Adam; 'we're going to take the wood to the village, and have it made there.'

'Nay, my lad, nay,' Lisbeth burst out in an eager, wailing tone; 'thee wotna let nobody make thy feyther's coffin but thysen? Who'd make it so well? An' him as know'd what good work war, an's got a son as is the head o' the village, an' all Treddles'on too, for cleverness.'

'Very well, mother, if that's thy wish, I'll make the coffin at home; but I thought thee wouldstna like to hear the work going on.'

'An' why shouldna I like't? It's the right thing to be done. An' what's liking got to do wi't? It's choice o' mislikings is all I'n got i' this world. One morsel's as good as another when your mouth's out o' taste. Thee mun set about it now this mornin' fust thing. I wonna ha' nobody to touch the coffin but thee.'

Adam's eyes met Seth's, which looked from Dinah to him rather wistfully.

'No, mother,' he said, 'I'll not consent but Seth shall have a hand in it too, if it's to be done at home. I'll go to the village this forenoon, because Mr Bürge 'ull want to see me, and Seth shall stay at home and begin the coffin. I can come back at noon, and then he can go.'

'Nay, nay,' persisted Lisbeth, beginning to cry, 'I'n set my heart on't as thee shalt ma' thy feyther's coffin. Thee't so stiff an' masterful, Thee't Ne'er do as thy mother wants thee. Thee wast often angered wi' thy feyther when he war alive; thee must be the better to him now he's gone. He'd ha' thought nothin' on't for Seth to ma's coffin.'

'Say no more, Adam, say no more,' said Seth, gently, though his voice told that he spoke with some effort;

‘mother’s in the right. I’ll go to work, and do thee stay at home.’

He passed into the workshop immediately, followed by Adam; while Lisbeth, automatically obeying her old habits, began to put away the breakfast things, as if she did not mean Dinah to take her place any longer. Dinah said nothing, but presently used the opportunity of quietly joining the brothers in the workshop.

They had already got on their aprons and paper-caps, and Adam was standing with his left hand on Seth’s shoulder, while he pointed with the hammer in his right to some boards which they were looking at. Their backs were turned towards the door by which Dinah entered, and she came in so gently that they were not aware of her presence till they heard her voice saying, ‘Seth Bede!’ Seth started, and they both turned round. Dinah looked as if she did not see Adam, and fixed her eyes on Seth’s face, saying with calm kindness –

‘I won’t say farewell. I shall see you again when you come from work. So as I’m at the farm before dark, it will be quite soon enough.’

‘Thank you, Dinah; I should like to walk home with you once more. It’ll perhaps be the last time.’

There was a little tremor in Seth’s voice. Dinah put out her hand and said, ‘You’ll have sweet peace in your mind to-day, Seth, for your tenderness and long-suffering towards your aged mother.’

She turned round and left the workshop as quickly and quietly as she had entered it. Adam had been observing her closely all the while, but she had not looked at him. As soon as she was gone, he said –

‘I don’t wonder at thee for loving her, Seth. She’s got a face like a lily.’

Seth’s soul rushed to his eyes and lips: he had never yet confessed his secret to Adam, but now he felt a delicious sense of disburthenment, as he answered –

‘Ay, Addy, I do love her — too much, I doubt. But she doesna love me, lad, only as one child o’ God loves another. She’ll never love any man as a husband — that’s my belief.’

‘Nay, lad, there’s no telling; thee mustna lose heart. She’s made out o’ stuff with a finer grain than most o’ the women; I can see that clear enough. But if she’s better than they are in other things, I canna think she’ll fall short of ’em in loving.’

No more was said. Seth set out to the village, and Adam began his work on the coffin.

‘God help the lad, and me too,’ he thought, as he lifted the board. ‘We’re like enough to find life a tough job — hard work inside and out. It’s a strange thing to think of a man as can lift a chair with his teeth, and walk fifty mile on end, trembling and turning hot and cold at only a look from one woman out of all the rest i’ the world. It’s a mystery we can give no account of; but no more we can of the sprouting o’ the seed, for that matter.’

CHAPTER XII

In the Wood

That same Thursday morning, as Arthur Donnithorne was moving about in his dressing-room, seeing his well-looking British person reflected in the old-fashioned mirrors, and stared at, from a dingy olive-green piece of tapestry, by Pharaoh's daughter and her maidens, who ought to have been minding the infant Moses,[1] he was holding a discussion with himself, which, by the time his valet was tying the black silk sling over his shoulder, had issued in a distinct practical resolution.

'I mean to go to Eagledale and fish for a week or so,' he said aloud. 'I shall take you with me, Pym, and set off this morning; so be ready by half-past eleven.'

The low whistle, which had assisted him in arriving at this resolution, here broke out into his loudest ringing tenor, and the corridor, as he hurried along it, echoed to his favourite song from the 'Beggar's Opera', 'When the heart of a man is oppressed with care.'[2] Not an heroic strain; nevertheless Arthur felt himself very heroic as he strode towards the stables to give his orders about the horses. His own approbation was necessary to him, and it was not an approbation to be enjoyed quite gratuitously; it must be won by a fair amount of merit. He had never yet forfeited that approbation, and he had considerable reliance on his own virtues. No young man could confess his faults more candidly; candour was one of his favourite virtues; and how can a man's candour be seen in all its lustre unless he has a few failings to talk of? But he had an agreeable confidence that his faults were all of a generous kind — impetuous, warmblooded, leonine; never crawling, crafty, reptilian. It was not possible for Arthur Donnithorne to do anything mean, dastardly, or cruel. 'No! I'm a devil of a fellow for getting myself into a hobble,[3] but I always take care the load shall fall on my own shoulders.' Unhappily there is no inherent poetical justice in hobbles, and they will sometimes obstinately refuse to inflict their worst consequences on the prime offender, in spite of his loudly expressed wish. It was entirely owing to this deficiency in the scheme of things that Arthur had ever brought any one into trouble besides himself. He was nothing, if not good-natured; and all his pictures of the future, when he should come into the estate, were made up of a prosperous, contented tenantry, adoring their landlord, who would be the model of an English gentleman — mansion in first-rate order, all elegance and high taste — jolly housekeeping, finest stud in Loamshire – purse open to all public objects — in short, everything as different as possible from what was now associated with the name of Donnithorne. And one of the first good actions he would perform in that future should be to increase Irwine's income for the vicarage of Hayslope,[4] so that he might keep a carriage for his mother and sisters. His hearty affection for the Rector dated from the age of frocks and trousers.[5] It was an affection partly filial, partly fraternal; — fraternal enough to make him like Irwine's company better than that of most younger men, and filial enough to make him shrink strongly from incurring Irwine's disapprobation.

You perceive that Arthur Donnithorne was 'a good fellow' – all his college[6] friends thought him such: he couldn't bear to see any one uncomfortable; he would have been sorry even in his angriest moods for any harm to happen to his grandfather; and his aunt Lydia herself had the benefit of that soft-heartedness which he bore towards the whole sex.[7] Whether he would have self-mastery enough to be always as harmless and purely beneficent as his good nature led him to desire, was a question that no one had yet decided against him: he was but twenty-one, you remember; and we don't inquire too closely into character in the case of a handsome generous young fellow, who will have property enough to support numerous peccadilloes — who, if he should unfortunately break a man's legs in his rash driving, will be able to pension him handsomely; or if he should happen to spoil a woman's existence for her, will make it up to her with expensive *bon-bons,* packed up and directed by his own hand. It would be ridiculous to be prying and analytic in such cases, as if one were inquiring into the character of a confidential clerk. We use round, general, gentlemanly epithets about a young man of birth and fortune; and ladies, with that fine intuition which is the distinguishing attribute of their sex, see at once that he is 'nice'. The chances are that he will go through life without scandalizing any one; a seaworthy vessel that no one would refuse to insure. Ships, certainly, are liable to casualties, which sometimes make terribly evident some flaw in their construction, that would never have been discoverable in smooth water; and many a 'good fellow', through a disastrous combination of circumstances, has undergone a like betrayal.

But we have no fair ground for entertaining unfavourable auguries concerning Arthur Donnithorne, who this morning proves himself capable of a prudent resolution founded on conscience. One thing is clear: Nature has taken care that he shall never go far astray with perfect comfort and satisfaction to himself; he will never get beyond that border-land of sin, where he will be perpetually harassed by assaults from the other side of the boundary. He will never be a courtier of Vice, and wear her orders in his button-hole.

It was about ten o'clock, and the sun was shining brilliantly; everything was looking lovelier for the yesterday's rain. It is a pleasant thing on such a morning to walk along the well-rolled gravel on one's way to the stables, meditating an excursion. But the scent of the stables, which, in a natural state of things, ought to be among the soothing influences of a man's life, always brought with it some irritation to Arthur. There was no having his own way in the stables; everything was managed in the stingiest fashion. His grandfather persisted in retaining as head groom an old dolt whom no sort of lever could move out of his old habits, and who was allowed to hire a succession of raw Loamshire lads as his subordinates, one of whom had lately tested a new pair of shears by clipping an oblong patch on Arthur's bay mare. This state of things is naturally embittering; one can put up with annoyances in the house, but to have the stable made a scene of vexation and disgust, is a point beyond what human flesh and blood can be expected to endure long together without danger of misanthropy.

Old John's wooden, deep-wrinkled face was the first object that met Arthur's eyes as he entered the stable-yard, and it quite poisoned for him the bark of the two bloodhounds that kept watch there. He could never speak quite patiently to the old blockhead.

'You must have Meg saddled for me and brought to the door at half-past eleven, and I shall want Rattler saddled for Pym at the same time. Do you hear?'

'Yes, I hear, I hear, Cap'n,' said old John, very deliberately, following the young master into the stable. John considered a young master as the natural enemy of an old servant, and young people in general as a poor contrivance for carrying on the world.

Arthur went in for the sake of patting Meg, declining as far as possible to see anything in the stables, lest he should lose his temper before breakfast. The pretty creature was in one of the inner stables, and turned her mild head as her master came beside her. Little Trot, a tiny spaniel, her inseparable companion in the stable, was comfortably curled up on her back.

'Well, Meg, my pretty girl,' said Arthur, patting her neck, 'we'll have a glorious canter this morning.'

'Nay, your honour, I donna see as that can be,' said John.

'Not be? Why not?'

'Why, she's got lamed.'

'Lamed, confound you! what do you mean?'

'Why, th' lad took her too close to Dalton's hosses, an' one on 'em flung out at her, an' she's got her shank bruised o' the near fore-leg.'

The judicious historian abstains from narrating precisely what ensued. You understand that there was a great deal of strong language, mingled with soothing 'who-ho's' while the leg was examined; that John stood by with quite as much emotion as if he had been a cunningly carved crab-tree walkingstick, and that Arthur Donnithorne presently repassed the iron gates of the pleasure-ground without singing as he went.

He considered himself thoroughly disappointed and annoyed. There was not another mount in the stable for himself and his servant besides Meg and Rattler. It was vexatious; just when he wanted to get out of the way for a week or two. It seemed culpable in Providence to allow such a combination of circumstances. To be shut up at the Chase with a broken arm, when every other fellow in his regiment was enjoying himself at Windsor — shut up with his grandfather, who had the same sort of affection for him as for his parchment deeds! And to be disgusted at every turn with the management of the house and the estate! In such circumstances a man necessarily gets in an ill humour, and works off the irritation by some excess or other. 'Salkeld would have drunk a bottle of port every day,' he muttered to himself; 'but I'm not well seasoned enough for that. Well, since I can't go to Eagledale, I'll have a gallop on Rattler to Norburne this morning, and lunch with Gawaine.'

Behind this explicit resolution there lay an implicit one. If he lunched with Gawaine and lingered chatting, he should not reach the Chase again till nearly five, when Hetty would be safe out of his sight in the housekeeper's room; and when she set out to go home, it would be his lazy time after dinner, so he should keep out of her way altogether. There really would have been no harm in being kind to the little thing, and it was worth dancing with a dozen ball-room belles only to look at Hetty for half an hour. But perhaps he had better not take any more notice of her; it might put notions into her head, as Irwine had hinted; though Arthur, for his part, thought girls were not by any means so soft and easily bruised; indeed, he had generally found them twice as cool and cunning as he was himself. As for any real harm in Hetty's

case, it was out of the question: Arthur Donnithorne accepted his own bond for himself with perfect confidence.

So the twelve o'clock sun saw him galloping towards Norburne; and by good fortune Halsell Common lay in his road, and gave him some fine leaps for Rattler. Nothing like 'taking' a few bushes and ditches for exorcising a demon; and it is really astonishing that the Centaurs,[8] with their immense advantages in this way, have left so bad a reputation in history.

After this, you will perhaps be surprised to hear, that although Gawaine was at home, the hand of the dial in the courtyard had scarcely cleared the last stroke of three, when Arthur returned through the entrance-gates, got down from the panting Rattler, and went into the house to take a hasty luncheon. But I believe there have been men since his day who have ridden a long way to avoid a rencontre, and then galloped hastily back lest they should miss it. It is the favourite stratagem of our passions to sham a retreat, and to turn sharp round upon us at the moment we have made up our minds that the day is our own.

'The Cap'n's been ridin' the devil's own pace,' said Dalton the coachman, whose person stood out in high relief as he smoked his pipe against the stable wall, when John brought up Rattler.

'An' I wish he'd get the devil to do's grooming for'n,' growled John.

'Ay; he'd hev a deal haimabler[9] groom nor what he has now,' observed Dalton; and the joke appeared to him so good, that, being left alone upon the scene, he continued at intervals to take his pipe from his mouth in order to wink at an imaginary audience, and shake luxuriously with a silent, ventral laughter; mentally rehearsing the dialogue from the beginning, that he might recite it with effect in the servants' hall.

When Arthur went up to his dressing-room again after luncheon, it was inevitable that the debate he had had with himself there earlier in the day should flash across his mind; but it was impossible for him now to dwell on the remembrance – impossible to recall the feelings and reflections which had been decisive with him then, any more than to recall the peculiar scent of the air that had freshened him when he first opened his window. The desire to see Hetty had rushed back like an ill-stemmed current; he was amazed himself at the force with which this trivial fancy seemed to grasp him: he was even rather tremulous as he brushed his hair — pooh! it was riding in that breakneck way. It was because he had made a serious affair of an idle matter, by thinking of it as if it were of any consequence. He would amuse himself by seeing Hetty to-day, and get rid of the whole thing from his mind. It was all Irwine's fault. 'If Irwine had said nothing, I shouldn't have thought half so much of Hetty as of Meg's lameness.' However, it was just the sort of day for lolling in the Hermitage, and he would go and finish Dr Moore's *Zeluco*[10] there before dinner. The Hermitage stood in Fir-tree Grove — the way Hetty was sure to come in walking from the Hall Farm. So nothing could be simpler and more natural: meeting Hetty was a mere circumstance of his walk, not its object.

Arthur's shadow flitted rather faster among the sturdy oaks of the Chase than might have been expected from the shadow of a tired man on a warm afternoon, and it was still scarcely four o'clock when he stood before the tall narrow gate leading into the delicious labyrinthine wood which skirted one side of the Chase, and which was called Fir-tree Grove, not because the firs were many, but because they were few. It was a wood of beeches and limes, with here and there a light, silver-stemmed birch — just the sort of wood most haunted by the nymphs: you see their white sunlit limbs gleaming athwart the boughs, or peeping from behind the smooth-sweeping outline of a tall lime; you hear their soft liquid laughter — but if you look with a too curious sacrilegious eye, they vanish behind the silvery beeches, they make you believe that their voice was only a running brooklet, perhaps they metamorphose themselves into a tawny squirrel that scampers away and mocks you from the topmost bough. It was not a grove with measured grass or rolled gravel for you to tread upon, but with narrow, hollow-shaped, earthy paths, edged with faint dashes of delicate moss — paths which look as if they were made by the free-will of the trees and underwood, moving reverently aside to look at the tall queen of the white-footed nymphs.

It was along the broadest of these paths that Arthur Donnithorne passed, under an avenue of limes and beeches. It was a still afternoon — the golden light was lingering languidly among the upper boughs, only glancing down here and there on the purple pathway and its edge of faintly sprinkled moss: an afternoon in which destiny disguises her cold awful face behind a hazy radiant veil, encloses us in warm downy wings, and poisons us with violet-scented breath. Arthur strolled along carelessly, with a book under his arm, but not looking on the ground as meditative men are apt to do; his eyes *would* fix themselves on the distant bend in the road, round which a little figure must surely appear before long. Ah! there she comes: first a bright patch of colour, like a tropic bird among the boughs, then a tripping figure, with a round hat on, and a small basket under her arm; then a deep-blushing, almost frightened, but bright-smiling girl, making her curtsy with a fluttered yet happy glance, as Arthur came up to her. If Arthur had had time to think at all, he would have thought it strange that he should feel fluttered too, be conscious of blushing too — in fact, look and feel as foolish as if he had been taken by surprise instead of meeting just what he expected. Poor

things! It was a pity they were not in that golden age of childhood when they would have stood face to face, eyeing each other with timid liking, then given each other a little butterfly kiss, and toddled off to play together. Arthur would have gone home to his silk-curtained cot, and Hetty to her home-spun pillow, and both would have slept without dreams, and to-morrow would have been a life hardly conscious of a yesterday.

Arthur turned round and walked by Hetty's side without giving a reason. They were alone together for the first time. What an overpowering presence that first privacy is! He actually dared not look at this little buttermaker for the first minute or two. As for Hetty, her feet rested on a cloud, and she was borne along by warm zephyrs; she had forgotten her rose-coloured ribbons; she was no more conscious of her limbs than if her childish soul had passed into a water-lily, resting on a liquid bed, and warmed by the midsummer sunbeams. It may seem a contradiction, but Arthur gathered a certain carelessness and confidence from his timidity: it was an entirely different state of mind from what he had expected in such a meeting with Hetty; and full as he was of vague feeling, there was room, in those moments of silence, for the thought that his previous debates and scruples were needless.

'You are quite right to choose this way of coming to the Chase,' he said at last, looking down at Hetty, 'it is so much prettier as well as shorter than coming by either of the lodges.'

'Yes, sir,' Hetty answered, with a tremulous, almost whispering voice. She didn't know one bit how to speak to a gentleman like Mr Arthur, and her very vanity made her more coy of speech.

'Do you come every week to see Mrs Pomfret?'

'Yes, sir, every Thursday, only when she's got to go out with Miss Donnithorne.'

'And she's teaching you something, is she?'

'Yes, sir, the lace-mending as she learnt abroad, and the stocking-mending — it looks just like the stocking, you can't tell it's been mended; and she teaches me cutting-out too.'

'What, are *you* going to be a lady's-maid?'

'I should like to be one very much indeed.' Hetty spoke more audibly now, but still rather tremulously; she thought, perhaps she seemed as stupid to Captain Donnithorne as Luke Britton did to her.

'I suppose Mrs Pomfret always expects you at this time?'

'She expects me at four o'clock. I'm rather late to-day, because my aunt couldn't spare me; but the regular time is four, because that gives us time before Miss Donnithorne's bell rings.'

'Ah, then, I must not keep you now, else I should like to show you the Hermitage. Did you ever see it?'

'No, sir.'

'This is the walk where we turn up to it. But we must not go now. I'll show it you some other time, if you'd like to see it?'

'Yes, please, sir.'

'Do you always come back this way in the evening, or are you afraid to come so lonely a road?'

'Oh no, sir, it's never late; I always set out by eight o'clock, and it's so light now in the evening. My aunt would be angry with me if I didn't get home before nine.'

'Perhaps Craig, the gardener, comes to take care of you?'

A deep blush overspread Hetty's face and neck. 'I'm sure he doesn't; I'm sure he never did; I wouldn't let him; I don't like him,' she said hastily, and the tears of vexation had come so fast, that before she had done speaking a bright drop rolled down her hot cheek. Then she felt ashamed to death that she was crying, and for one long instant her happiness was all gone. But in the next she felt an arm steal round her, and a gentle voice said –

'Why, Hetty, what makes you cry? I didn't mean to vex you. I wouldn't vex you for the world, you little blossom. Come, don't cry; look at me, else I shall think you won't forgive me.'

Arthur had laid his hand on the soft arm that was nearest to him, and was stooping towards Hetty with a look of coaxing entreaty. Hetty lifted her long dewy lashes, and met the eyes that were bent towards her with a sweet, timid, beseeching look. What a space of time those three moments were, while their eyes met and his arms touched her! Love is such a simple thing when we have only one-and-twenty summers and a sweet girl of seventeen trembles under our glance, as if she were a bud first opening her heart with wondering rapture to the morning. Such young unfurrowed souls roll to meet each other like two velvet peaches that touch softly and are at rest; they mingle as easily as two brooklets that ask for nothing but to entwine themselves and ripple with ever-interlacing curves in the leafiest hiding-places. While Arthur gazed into Hetty's dark beseeching eyes, it made no difference to him what sort of English she spoke; and even if hoops and powder had been in fashion, he would very likely not have been sensible just then that Hetty wanted those signs of high breeding.

But they started asunder with beating hearts: something had fallen on the ground with a rattling noise; it was Hetty's basket; all her little workwoman's matters were scattered on the path, some of them showing a capability of rolling to great lengths. There was much to be done in picking up, and not a word was spoken; but when Arthur hung the basket over her arm again, the poor child felt a strange difference in his look and manner. He just pressed her hand, and said, with a look and tone that were almost chilling to her –

'I have been hindering you; I must not keep you any longer now. You will be expected at the house. Good-bye.'

Without waiting for her to speak, he turned away from her and hurried back towards the road that led to the Hermitage, leaving Hetty to pursue her way in a strange dream, that seemed to have begun in bewildering delight, and was now passing into contrarieties and sadness. Would he meet her again as she came home? Why had he spoken almost as if he were displeased with her? and then run away so suddenly? She cried, hardly knowing why.

Arthur too was very uneasy, but his feelings were lit up for him by a more distinct consciousness. He hurried to the Hermitage, which stood in the heart of the wood, unlocked the door with a hasty wrench, slammed it after him, pitched *Zeluco* into the most distant corner, and, thrusting his right hand into his pocket, first walked four or five times up and down the scanty length of the little room, and then seated himself on the ottoman[11] in an uncomfortable stiff way, as we often do when we wish not to abandon ourselves to feeling.

He was getting in love with Hetty — that was quite plain. He was ready to pitch everything else — no matter where — for the sake of surrendering himself to this delicious feeling which had just disclosed itself. It was no use blinking the fact now — they would get too fond of each other, if he went on taking notice of her — and what would come of it? He should have to go away in a few weeks, and the poor little thing would be miserable. He *must not* see her alone again; he must keep out of her way. What a fool he was for coming back from Gawaine's!

He got up and threw open the windows to let in the soft breath of the afternoon, and the healthy scent of the firs that made a belt round the Hermitage. The soft air did not help his resolutions, as he leaned out and looked into the leafy distance. But he considered his resolution sufficiently fixed: there was no need to debate with himself any longer. He had made up his mind not to meet Hetty again; and now he might give himself up to thinking how immensely agreeable it would be if circumstances were different — how pleasant it would have been to meet her this evening as she came back, and put his arm round her again and look into her sweet face. He wondered if the dear little thing were thinking of him too — twenty to one she was. How beautiful her eyes were with the tear on their lashes! He would like to satisfy his soul for a day with looking at them, and he *must* see her again: — he must see her, simply to remove any false impression from her mind about his manner to her just now. He would behave in a quiet, kind way to her — just to prevent her from going home with her head full of wrong fancies. Yes, that would be the best thing to do after all.

It was a long while — more than an hour — before Arthur had brought his meditations to this point; but once arrived there, he could stay no longer at the Hermitage. The time must be filled up with movement until he should see Hetty again. And it was already late enough to go and dress for dinner, for his grandfather's dinner-hour was six.

CHAPTER XIII

Evening in the Wood

It happened that Mrs Pomfret had had a slight quarrel with Mrs Best, the housekeeper, on this Thursday morning — a fact which had two consequences highly convenient to Hetty. It caused Mrs Pomfret to have tea sent up to her own room, and it inspired that exemplary lady's-maid with so lively a recollection of former passages in Mrs Best's conduct, and of dialogues in which Mrs Best had decidedly the inferiority as an interlocutor with Mrs Pomfret, that Hetty required no more presence of mind than was demanded for using her needle, and throwing in an occasional 'yes' or 'no'. She would have wanted to put on her hat earlier than usual; only she had told Captain Donnithorne that she usually set out about eight o'clock, and if he *should* go to the Grove again expecting to see her, and she should be gone! Would he come? Her little butterfly-soul fluttered incessantly between memory and dubious expectation. At last the minute-hand of the old-fashioned brazen-faced timepiece was on the last quarter to eight, and there was every reason for its being time to get ready for departure. Even Mrs Pomfret's preoccupied mind did not prevent her from noticing what looked like a new flush of beauty in the little thing as she tied on her hat before the looking-glass.

'That child gets prettier and prettier every day, I do believe,' was her inward comment. 'The more's the pity. She'll get neither a place nor a husband any the sooner for it. Sober well-to-do men don't like such pretty wives. When I was a girl, I was more admired than if I had been so very pretty. However, she's reason to be grateful to me for teaching her something to get her bread with, better than farmhouse work. They always told me I was good-natured — and that's the truth, and to my hurt, too, else there's them in this house that wouldn't be here now to lord it over me in the housekeeper's room.'

Hetty walked hastily across the short space of pleasure-ground which she had to traverse, dreading to meet Mr Craig, to whom she could hardly have spoken civilly. How relieved she was when she had got safely under the oaks and among the fern of the Chase! Even then she was as ready to be startled as the deer that leaped away at her approach. She thought nothing of the evening light that lay gently in the grassy alleys between the fern, and made the beauty of their living green more visible than it had been in the overpowering flood of noon: she thought of nothing that was present. She only saw something that was possible: Mr Arthur Donnithorne coming to meet her again along the Fir-tree Grove. That was the foreground of Hetty's picture; behind it lay a bright hazy something — days that were not to be as the other days of her life had been. It was as if she had been wooed by a river-god, who might any time take her to his wondrous halls below a watery heaven. There was no knowing what would come, since this strange entrancing delight had come. If a chest full of lace and satin and jewels had been sent her from some unknown source,[1] how could she but have thought that her whole lot was going to change, and that tomorrow some still more bewildering joy would befall her? Hetty had never read a novel; if she had ever seen one, I think the words would have been too hard for her; how then could she find a shape for her expectations? They were as formless as the sweet languid odours of the garden at the Chase, which had floated past her as she walked by the gate.

She is at another gate now — that leading into Fir-tree Grove. She enters the wood, where it is already twilight, and at every step she takes, the fear at her heart becomes colder. If he should not come! Oh how dreary it was — the thought of going out at the other end of the wood, into the unsheltered road, without having seen him. She reaches the first turning towards the Hermitage, walking slowly — he is not there. She hates the leveret[2] that runs across the path: she hates everything that is not what she longs for. She walks on, happy whenever she is coming to a bend in the road, for perhaps he is behind it. No. She is beginning to cry: her heart has swelled so, the tears stand in her eyes; she gives one great sob, while the corners of her mouth quiver, and the tears roll down.

She doesn't know that there is another turning to the Hermitage, that she is close against it, and that Arthur Donnithorne is only a few yards from her, full of one thought, and a thought of which she only is the object. He is going to see Hetty again; that is the longing which has been growing through the last three hours to a feverish thirst. Not, of course, to speak in the caressing way into which he had unguardedly fallen before dinner, but to set things right with her by a kindness which would have the air of friendly civility, and prevent her from running away with wrong notions about their mutual relation.

If Hetty had known he was there, she would not have cried; and it would have been better, for then Arthur would perhaps have behaved as wisely as he had intended. As it was, she started when he appeared at the end of the side-alley, and looked up at him with two great drops rolling down her cheeks. What else could he do but speak to her in a soft, soothing tone, as if she were a bright-eyed spaniel with a thorn in her foot?

'Has something frightened you, Hetty? Have you seen anything in the wood? Don't be frightened — I'll take care of you now.'

Hetty was blushing so, she didn't know whether she was happy or miserable. To be crying again — what did gentlemen think of girls who cried in that way? She felt unable even to say 'no', but could only look away from him, and wipe the tears from her cheek. Not before a great drop had fallen on her rose-coloured strings; she knew that quite well.

'Come, be cheerful again. Smile at me, and tell me what's the matter. Come, tell me.'

Hetty turned her head towards him, whispered, 'I thought you wouldn't come,' and slowly got courage to lift her eyes to him. That look was too much: he must have had eyes of Egyptian granite not to look too lovingly in return.

'You little frightened bird! little tearful rose! silly pet! You won't cry again, now I'm with you, will you?'

Ah, he doesn't know in the least what he is saying. This is not what he meant to say. His arm is stealing round the waist again, it is tightening its clasp; he is bending his face nearer and nearer to the round cheek, his lips are meeting those pouting child-lips, and for a long moment time has vanished. He may be a shepherd in Arcadia for aught he knows, he may be the first youth kissing the first maiden, he may be Eros himself, sipping the lips of Psyche[3] — it is all one.

There was no speaking for minutes after. They walked along with beating hearts till they came within sight of the gate at the end of the wood. Then they looked at each other, not quite as they had looked before, for in their eyes there was the memory of a kiss.

But already something bitter had begun to mingle itself with the fountain of sweets: already Arthur was uncomfortable. He took his arm from Hetty's waist, and said –

'Here we are, almost at the end of the Grove. I wonder how late it is,' he added, pulling out his watch. 'Twenty minutes past eight — but my watch is too fast. However, I'd better not go any further now. Trot along quickly with your little feet, and get home safely. Good-bye.'

He took her hand, and looked at her half sadly, half with a constrained smile. Hetty's eyes seemed to beseech him not to go away yet; but he patted her cheek and said 'Good-bye' again. She was obliged to turn away from him, and go on.

As for Arthur, he rushed back through the wood, as if he wanted to put a wide space between himself and Hetty. He would not go to the Hermitage again; he remembered how he had debated with himself there before dinner, and it had all come to nothing — worse than nothing. He walked right on into the Chase, glad to get out of the Grove, which surely was haunted by his evil genius. Those beeches and smooth limes – there was something enervating in the very sight of them; but the strong knotted old oaks had no bending languor in them – the sight of them would give a man some energy. Arthur lost himself among the narrow openings in the fern, winding about without seeking any issue, till the twilight deepened almost to night under the great boughs, and the hare looked black as it darted across his path.

He was feeling much more strongly than he had done in the morning: it was as if his horse had wheeled round from a leap, and dared to dispute his mastery. He was dissatisfied with himself, irritated, mortified. He no sooner fixed his mind on the probable consequences of giving way to the emotions which had stolen over him to-day — of continuing to notice Hetty, of allowing himself any opportunity for such slight caresses as he had been betrayed into already – than he refused to believe such a future possible for himself. To flirt with Hetty was a very different affair from flirting with a pretty girl of his own station: that was understood to be an amusement on both sides; or, if it became serious, there was no obstacle to marriage. But this little thing would be spoken ill of directly, if she happened to be seen walking with him; and then those excellent people, the Poysers, to whom a good name was as precious as if they had the best blood in the land in their veins — he should hate himself if he made a scandal of that sort, on the estate that was to be his own some day, and among tenants by whom he liked, above all, to be respected. He could no more believe that he should so fall in his own esteem than that he should break both his legs and go on crutches all the rest of his life. He couldn't imagine himself in that position; it was too odious, too unlike him.

And even if no one knew anything about it, they might get too fond of each other, and then there could be nothing but the misery of parting, after all. No gentleman, out of a ballad, could marry a farmer's niece. There must be an end to the whole thing at once. It was too foolish.

And yet he had been so determined this morning, before he went to Gawaine's; and while he was there

something had taken hold of him and made him gallop back. It seemed, he couldn't quite depend on his own resolution, as he had thought he could: he almost wished his arm would get painful again, and then he should think of nothing but the comfort it would be to get rid of the pain. There was no knowing what impulse might seize him to-morrow, in this confounded place, where there was nothing to occupy him imperiously through the live-long day. What could he do to secure himself from any more of this folly?

There was but one resource. He would go and tell Irwine – tell him everything. The mere act of telling it would make it seem trivial; the temptation would vanish, as the charm of fond words vanishes when one repeats them to the indifferent. In every way it would help him, to tell Irwine. He would ride to Broxton Rectory the first thing after breakfast to-morrow.

Arthur had no sooner come to this determination than he began to think which of the paths would lead him home, and made as short a walk thither as he could. He felt sure he should sleep now: he had had enough to tire him, and there was no more need for him to think.

CHAPTER XIV

The Return Home

While that parting in the wood was happening, there was a parting in the cottage too, and Lisbeth had stood with Adam at the door, straining her aged eyes to get the last glimpse of Seth and Dinah, as they mounted the opposite slope.

'Eh, I'm loath to see the last on her,' she said to Adam, as they turned into the house again. 'I'd ha' been willin' t' ha' her about me till I died and went to lie by my old man. She'd make it easier dyin' — she spakes so gentle an' moves about so still. I could be fast sure that pictur was drawed for her i' thy new Bible — th' angel a-sittin' on the big stone by the grave. Eh, I wouldna mind ha'in' a daughter like that; but nobody Ne'er marries them as is good for aught.'

'Well, mother, I hope thee *wilt* have her for a daughter; for Seth's got a liking for her, and I hope she'll get a liking for Seth in time.'

'Where's th' use o' talkin' a-that'n? She caresna for Seth. She's goin' away twenty mile aff. How's she to get a likin' for him, I'd like to know? No more nor the cake 'ull come wi'out the leaven.[1] Thy figurin' books might ha' tould thee better nor that, I should think, else thee mightst as well read the commin print, as Seth allays does.'

'Nay, mother,' said Adam, laughing, 'the figures tell us a fine deal, and we couldn't go far without 'em, but they don't tell us about folk's feelings. It's a nicer job to calculate *them.* But Seth's as good-hearted a lad as ever handled a tool, and plenty o' sense, and good-looking too; and he's got the same way o' thinking as Dinah. He deserves to win her, though there's no denying she's a rare bit o' workmanship. You don't see such women turned off the wheel every day.'

'Eh, Thee't allays stick up for thy brother. Thee'st been just the same, e'er sin' ye war little uns together. Thee wart allays for halving iverything wi' him. But what's Seth got to do with marryin', as is On'y three-an'-twenty? He'd more need to learn an' lay by sixpence. An' as for his desarving her — she's two 'ear older nor Seth: she's pretty near as old as thee. But that's the way; folks mun allays choose by contrairies, as if they must be sorted like the pork — a bit o' good meat wi' a bit o' offal.'

To the feminine mind in some of its moods, all things that might be, receive a temporary charm from comparison with what is; and since Adam did not want to marry Dinah himself, Lisbeth felt rather peevish on that score — as peevish as she would have been if he *had* wanted to marry her, and so shut himself out from Mary Bürge and the partnership as effectually as by marrying Hetty.

It was more than half-past eight when Adam and his mother were talking in this way, so that when, about ten minutes later, Hetty reached the turning of the lane that led to the farmyard gate, she saw Dinah and Seth approaching it from the opposite direction, and waited for them to come up to her. They, too, like Hetty, had lingered a little in their walk, for Dinah was trying to speak words of comfort and strength to Seth in these parting moments. But when they saw Hetty, they paused and shook hands: Seth turned homewards, and Dinah came on alone.

'Seth Bede would have come and spoken to you, my dear,' she said, as she reached Hetty, 'but he's very full of trouble to-night.'

Hetty answered with a dimpled smile, as if she did not quite know what had been said; and it made a strange contrast to see that sparkling self-engrossed loveliness looked at by Dinah's calm pitying face, with its open glance which told that her heart lived in no cherished secrets of its own, but in feelings which it longed to share with all the world. Hetty liked Dinah as well as she had ever liked any woman; how was it possible to feel otherwise towards one who always put in a kind word for her when her aunt was finding fault, and who was always ready to take Totty off her hands — little tiresome Totty, that was made such a pet of by every one, and that Hetty could see no interest in at all? Dinah had never said anything disapproving or reproachful to Hetty during her whole visit to the Hall Farm; she had talked to her a great deal in a serious way, but Hetty didn't mind that much, for she never listened: whatever Dinah might say, she almost always stroked Hetty's cheek after it, and wanted to do some mending for her. Dinah was a riddle to her; Hetty looked at her much in the same way as one might imagine a little perching bird that could only flutter from bough to bough, to look at the swoop of the swallow or the mounting of the lark;

but she did not care to solve such riddles, any more than she cared to know what was meant by the pictures in the 'Pilgrim's Progress',[2] or in the old folio Bible that Marty and Tommy always plagued her about on a Sunday.

Dinah took her hand now and drew it under her own arm.

'You look very happy to-night, dear child,' she said. 'I shall think of you often when I'm at Snowfield, and see your face before me as it is now. It's a strange thing — sometimes when I'm quite alone, sitting in my room with my eyes closed, or walking over the hills, the people I've seen and known, if it's only been for a few days, are brought before me, and I hear their voices and see them look and move almost plainer than I ever did when they were really with me so as I could touch them. And then my heart is drawn out towards them, and I feel their lot as if it was my own, and I take comfort in spreading it before the Lord and resting in His love, on their behalf as well as my own. And so I feel sure you will come before me.'

She paused a moment, but Hetty said nothing.

'It has been a very precious time to me,' Dinah went on, 'last night and to-day — seeing two such good sons as Adam and Seth Bede. They are so tender and thoughtful for their aged mother. And she has been telling me what Adam has done, for these many years, to help his father and his brother; it's wonderful what a spirit of wisdom and knowledge[3] he has, and how he's ready to use it all in behalf of them that are feeble. And I'm sure he has a loving spirit too. I've noticed it often among my own people around Snowfield, that the strong, skilful men are often the gentlest to the women and children; and it's pretty to see 'em carrying the little babies as if they were no heavier than little birds. And the babies always seem to like the strong arm best. I feel sure it would be so with Adam Bede. Don't you think so, Hetty?'

'Yes,' said Hetty, abstractedly, for her mind had been all the while in the wood, and she would have found it difficult to say what she was assenting to. Dinah saw she was not inclined to talk, but there would not have been time to say much more, for they were now at the yard-gate.

The still twilight, with its dying western red, and its few faint struggling stars, rested on the farmyard, where there was not a sound to be heard but the stamping of the cart-horses in the stable. It was about twenty minutes after sunset: the fowls were all gone to roost, and the bull-dog lay stretched on the straw outside his kennel, with the black-and-tan terrier by his side, when the falling-to of the gate disturbed them, and set them barking, like good officials, before they had any distinct knowledge of the reason.

The barking had its effect in the house, for, as Dinah and Hetty approached, the doorway was filled by a portly figure, with a ruddy black-eyed face, which bore in it the possibility of looking extremely acute, and occasionally contemptuous, on market-days, but had now a predominant after-supper expression of hearty good nature. It is well known that great scholars who have shown the most pitiless acerbity in their criticism of other men's scholarship, have yet been of a relenting and indulgent temper in private life; and I have heard of a learned man meekly rocking the twins in the cradle with his left hand, while with his right he inflicted the most lacerating sarcasms on an opponent who had betrayed a brutal ignorance of Hebrew. Weaknesses and errors must be forgiven — alas! they are not alien to us — but the man who takes the wrong side on the momentous subject of the Hebrew points[4] must be treated as the enemy of his race. There was the same sort of antithetic mixture in Martin Poyser: he was of so excellent a disposition that he had been kinder and more respectful than ever to his old father since he had made a deed of gift of all his property, and no man judged his neighbours more charitably on all personal matters; but for a farmer, like Luke Britton, for example, whose fallows were not well cleaned, who didn't know the rudiments of hedging and ditching, and showed but a small share of judgment in the purchase of winter stock, Martin Poyser was as hard and implacable as the north-east wind. Luke Britton could not make a remark, even on the weather, but Martin Poyser detected in it a taint of that unsoundness and general ignorance which was palpable in all his farming operations. He hated to see the fellow lift the pewter pint to his mouth in the bar of the Royal George on market-day, and the mere sight of him on the other side of the road brought a severe and critical expression into his black eyes, as different as possible from the fatherly glance he bent on his two nieces as they approached the door. Mr Poyser had smoked his evening pipe, and now held his hands in his pockets, as the only resource of a man who continues to sit up after the day's business is done.

'Why, lasses, ye're rather late to-night,' he said, when they reached the little gate leading into the causeway. 'The mother's begun to fidget about you, an' she's got the little un ill. An' how did you leave the old woman Bede, Dinah? Is she much down about the old man? He'd been but a poor bargain to her this five year.'

'She's been greatly distressed for the loss of him,' said Dinah; 'but she's seemed more comforted to-day. Her son Adam's been at home all day, working at his father's coffin, and she loves to have him at home. She's been talking about him to me almost all the day. She has a loving heart, though she's sorely given to fret and be fearful. I wish she had a surer trust to comfort her in her old age.'

‘Adam’s sure enough,’ said Mr Poyser, misunderstanding Dinah’s wish. ‘There’s no fear but he’ll yield well i’ the threshing. He’s not one o’ them as is all straw and no grain. I’ll be bond for him any day, as he’ll be a good son to the last. Did he say he’d be coming to see us soon? But come in, come in,’ he added, making way for them; ‘I hadn’t need keep y’ out any longer.’

The tall buildings round the yard shut out a good deal of the sky, but the large window let in abundant light to show every corner of the house-place.

Mrs Poyser, seated in the rocking-chair, which had been brought out of the ‘right-hand parlour’, was trying to soothe Totty to sleep. But Totty was not disposed to sleep; and when her cousins entered, she raised herself up, and showed a pair of flushed cheeks, which looked fatter than ever now they were defined by the edge of her linen night-cap.

In the large wicker-bottomed arm-chair in the left-hand chimney-nook sat old Martin Poyser, a hale but shrunken and bleached image of his portly black-haired son — his head hanging forward a little, and his elbows pushed backwards so as to allow the whole of his fore-arm to rest on the arm of the chair. His blue handkerchief was spread over his knees, as was usual indoors, when it was not hanging over his head; and he sat watching what went forward with the quiet *outward* glance of healthy old age, which, disengaged from any interest in an inward drama, spies out pins upon the floor, follows one’s minutest motions with an unexpectant purposeless tenacity, watches the flickering of the flame or the sun-gleams on the wall, counts the quarries on the floor, watches even the hand of the clock, and pleases itself with detecting a rhythm in the tick.

‘What a time o’ night this is to come home, Hetty,’ said Mrs Poyser. ‘Look at the clock, do; why, it’s going on for half-past nine, and I’ve sent the gells to bed this half-hour, and late enough too; when they’ve got to get up at half after four, and the mowers’ bottles to fill, and the baking; and here’s this blessed child wi’ the fever for what I know, and as wakeful as if it was dinner-time, and nobody to help me to give her the physic but your uncle, and fine work there’s been, and half of it spilt on her night-gown — it’s well if she’s swallowed more nor ’ull make her worse istead o’ better. But folks as have no mind to be o’ use have allays the luck to be out o’ the road when there’s anything to be done.’

‘I did set out before eight, aunt,’ said Hetty, in a pettish tone, with a slight toss of her head. ‘But this clock’s so much before the clock at the Chase, there’s no telling what time it’ll be when I get here.’

‘What! you’d be wanting the clock set by gentlefolks’s time, would you? an’ sit up burnin’ candle, an’ lie a-bed wi’ the sun a-bakin’ you like a cowcumber[5] i’ the frame? The clock hasn’t been put forrard for the first time to-day, I reckon.’

The fact was, Hetty had really forgotten the difference of the clocks when she told Captain Donnithorne that she set out at eight, and this, with her lingering pace, had made her nearly half an hour later than usual. But here her aunt’s attention was diverted from this tender subject by Totty, who, perceiving at length that the arrival of her cousins was not likely to bring anything satisfactory to her in particular, began to cry, ‘Munny, munny’, in an explosive manner.

‘Well, then, my pet, mother’s got her, mother won’t leave her; Totty be a good dilling,[6] and go to sleep now,’ said Mrs Poyser, leaning back and rocking the chair, while she tried to make Totty nestle against her. But Totty only cried louder, and said ‘Don’t yock!’ So the mother, with that wondrous patience which love gives to the quickest temperament, sat up again, and pressed her cheek against the linen night-cap and kissed it, and forgot to scold Hetty any longer.

‘Come, Hetty,’ said Martin Poyser, in a conciliatory tone, ‘go and get your supper i’ the pantry, as the things are all put away; an’ then you can come an’ take the little un while your aunt undresses herself, for she won’t lie down in bed without her mother. An’ I reckon *you* could eat a bit, Dinah, for they don’t keep much of a house down there.’

‘No, thank you, uncle,’ said Dinah; ‘I ate a good meal before I came away, for Mrs Bede would make a kettle-cake[7] for me.’

‘I don’t want any supper,’ said Hetty, taking off her hat. ‘I can hold Totty now, if aunt wants me.’

‘Why, what nonsense that is to talk!’ said Mrs Poyser. ‘Do you think you can live wi’out eatin’, an’ nourish your inside wi’ stickin’ red ribbons on your head? Go an’ get your supper this minute, child; there’s a nice bit o’ cold pudding i’ the safe[8] — just what you’re fond of.’

Hetty complied silently by going towards the pantry, and Mrs Poyser went on speaking to Dinah.

‘Sit down, my dear, an’ look as if you knowed what it was to make yourself a bit comfortable i’ the world. I warrant the old woman was glad to see you, since you stayed so long.’

‘She seemed to like having me there at last; but her sons say she doesn’t like young women about her commonly; and I thought just at first she was almost angry with me for going.’

‘Eh, it’s a poor look-out when th’ ould foulks doesna like the young uns,’ said old Martin, bending his

head down lower, and seeming to trace the pattern of the quarries with his eye.

‘Ay, it’s ill livin’ in a hen-roost for them as doesn’t like fleas,’ said Mrs Poyser. ‘We’ve all had our turn at bein’ young, I reckon, be’t good luck or ill.’

‘But she must learn to ‘commodate herself to young women,’ said Mr Poyser, ‘for it isn’t to be counted on as Adam and Seth ’ull keep bachelors for the next ten year to please their mother. That ’ud be unreasonable. It isn’t right for old nor young nayther to make a bargain all o’ their own side. What’s good for one’s good all round i’ the long-run. I’m no friend to young fellows a-marrying afore they know the difference atween a crab[9] an’ a apple; but they may wait o’er long.’

‘To be sure,’ said Mrs Poyser; ‘if you go past your dinnertime, there’ll be little relish o’ your meat. You turn it o’er an’ o’er wi’ your fork, an’ don’t eat it after all. You find faut wi’ your meat, an’ the faut’s all i’ your own stomach.’

Hetty now came back from the pantry, and said, ‘I can take Totty now, aunt, if you like.’

‘Come, Rachel,’ said Mr Poyser, as his wife seemed to hesitate, seeing that Totty was at last nestling quietly, ‘thee’dst better let Hetty carry her up-stairs, while thee tak’st thy things off. Thee’t tired. It’s time thee wast in bed. Thee’t bring on the pain in thy side again.’

‘Well, she may hold her if the child ’ull go to her,’ said Mrs Poyser.

Hetty went close to the rocking-chair, and stood without her usual smile, and without any attempt to entice Totty, simply waiting for her aunt to give the child into her hands.

‘Wilt go to cousin Hetty, my dilling, while mother gets ready to go to bed? Then Totty shall go into mother’s bed, and sleep there all night.’

Before her mother had done speaking, Totty had given her answer in an unmistakable manner, by knitting her brow, setting her tiny teeth against her under-lip, and leaning forward to slap Hetty on the arm with her utmost force. Then, without speaking, she nestled to her mother again.

‘Hey, hey,’ said Mr Poyser, while Hetty stood without moving, ‘not go to cousin Hetty? That’s like a babby: Totty’s a little woman, an’ not a babby.’

‘It’s no use trying to persuade her,’ said Mrs Poyser. ‘She allays takes against Hetty when she isn’t well. Happen she’ll go to Dinah.’

Dinah, having taken off her bonnet and shawl, had hitherto kept quietly seated in the background, not liking to thrust herself between Hetty and what was considered Hetty’s proper work. But now she came forward, and, putting out her arms, said, ‘Come, Totty, come and let Dinah carry her up-stairs along with mother: poor, poor mother! she’s so tired — she wants to go to bed.’

Totty turned her face towards Dinah, and looked at her an instant, then lifted herself up, put out her little arms, and let Dinah lift her from her mother’s lap. Hetty turned away without any sign of ill-humour, and taking her hat from the table, stood waiting with an air of indifference, to see if she should be told to do anything else.

‘You may make the door fast now, Poyser; Alick’s been come in this long while,’ said Mrs Poyser, rising with an appearance of relief from her low chair. ‘Get me the matches down, Hetty, for I must have the rushlight[10] burning i’ my room. Come, father.’

The heavy wooden bolts began to roll in the house doors, and old Martin prepared to move, by gathering up his blue handkerchief, and reaching his bright knobbed walnut-tree stick from the corner. Mrs Poyser then led the way out of the kitchen, followed by the grandfather, and Dinah with Totty in her arms — all going to bed by twilight, like the birds. Mrs Poyser, on her way, peeped into the room where her two boys lay, just to see their ruddy round cheeks on the pillow, and to hear for a moment their light regular breathing.

‘Come, Hetty, get to bed,’ said Mr Poyser, in a soothing tone, as he himself turned to go up-stairs. ‘You didna mean to be late, I’ll be bound, but your aunt’s been worrited to-day. Good-night, my wench, good-night.’

CHAPTER XV

The Two Bed-Chambers

Hetty and Dinah both slept in the second story, in rooms adjoining each other, meagrely-furnished rooms, with no blinds to shut out the light, which was now beginning to gather new strength from the rising of the moon — more than enough strength to enable Hetty to move about and undress with perfect comfort. She could see quite well the pegs in the old painted linen-press on which she hung her hat and gown; she could see the head of every pin on her red cloth pin-cushion; she could see a reflection of herself in the old-fashioned looking-glass, quite as distinct as was needful, considering that she had only to brush her hair and put on her night-cap. A queer old looking-glass! Hetty got into an ill-temper with it almost every time she dressed. It had been considered a handsome glass in its day, and had probably been bought into the Poyser family a quarter of a century before, at a sale of genteel household furniture. Even now an auctioneer could say something for it: it had a great deal of tarnished gilding about it; it had a firm mahogany base, well supplied with drawers, which opened with a decided jerk, and sent the contents leaping out from the farthest corners, without giving you the trouble of reaching them; above all, it had a brass candle-socket on each side, which would give it an aristocratic air to the very last. But Hetty objected to it because it had numerous dim blotches sprinkled over the mirror, which no rubbing would remove, and because, instead of swinging backwards and forwards, it was fixed in an upright position, so that she could only get one good view of her head and neck, and that was to be had only by sitting down on a low chair before her dressing-table. And the dressing-table was no dressing-table at all, but a small old chest of drawers, the most awkward thing in the world to sit down before, for the big brass handles quite hurt her knees, and she couldn't get near the glass at all comfortably. But devout worshippers never allow inconveniences to prevent them from performing their religious rites, and Hetty this evening was more bent on her peculiar form of worship than usual.

Having taken off her gown and white kerchief, she drew a key from the large pocket that hung outside her petticoat, and, unlocking one of the lower drawers in the chest, reached from it two short bits of wax candle — secretly bought at Treddleston — and stuck them in the two brass sockets. Then she drew forth a bundle of matches, and lighted the candles; and last of all, a small red-framed shilling looking-glass, without blotches. It was into this small glass that she chose to look first after seating herself. She looked into it, smiling, and turning her head on one side, for a minute, then laid it down and took out her brush and comb from an upper drawer. She was going to let down her hair, and make herself look like that picture of a lady in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing-room. It was soon done, and the dark hyacinthine[1] curves fell on her neck. It was not heavy, massive, merely rippling hair, but soft and silken, running at every opportunity into delicate rings. But she pushed it all backward to look like the picture, and form a dark curtain, throwing into relief her round white neck. Then she put down her brush and comb, and looked at herself, folding her arms before her, still like the picture. Even the old mottled glass couldn't help sending back a lovely image, none the less lovely because Hetty's stays were not of white satin — such as I feel sure heroines must generally wear — but of a dark greenish cotton texture.

O yes! she was very pretty: Captain Donnithorne thought so. Prettier than anybody about Hayslope — prettier than any of the ladies she had ever seen visiting at the Chase — indeed it seemed fine ladies were rather old and ugly — and prettier than Miss Bacon, the miller's daughter, who was called the beauty of Treddleston. And Hetty looked at herself tonight with quite a different sensation from what she had ever felt before; there was an invisible spectator whose eye rested on her like morning on the flowers. His soft voice was saying over and over again those pretty things she had heard in the wood; his arm was round her, and the delicate rose-scent of his hair was with her still. The vainest woman is never thoroughly conscious of her own beauty till she is loved by the man who sets her own passion vibrating in return.

But Hetty seemed to have made up her mind that something was wanting, for she got up and reached an old black lace scarf out of the linen-press, and a pair of large earrings out of the sacred drawer from which she had taken her candles. It was an old old scarf, full of rents, but it would make a becoming border round her shoulders, and set off the whiteness of her upper arm. And she would take out the little earrings she had in her ears — oh, how her aunt had scolded her for having her ears bored! — and put in those large ones: they were but coloured glass and gilding; but if you didn't know what they were made of, they looked just

as well as what the ladies wore. And so she sat down again, with the large earrings in her ears, and the black lace scarf adjusted round her shoulders. She looked down at her arms: no arms could be prettier down to a little way below the elbow — they were white and plump, and dimpled to match her cheeks; but towards the wrist, she thought with vexation that they were coarsened by butter-making, and other work that ladies never did.

Captain Donnithorne couldn't like her to go on doing work: he would like to see her in nice clothes, and thin shoes and white stockings, perhaps with silk clocks[2] to them; for he must love her very much — no one else had ever put his arm round her and kissed her in that way. He would want to marry her, and make a lady of her; she could hardly dare to shape the thought — yet how else could it be? Marry her quite secretly, as Mr James, the Doctor's assistant, married the Doctor's niece, and nobody ever found it out for a long while after, and then it was of no use to be angry. The Doctor had told her aunt all about it in Hetty's hearing. She didn't know how it would be, but it was quite plain the old Squire could never be told anything about it, for Hetty was ready to faint with awe and fright if she came across him at the Chase. He might have been earth-born, for what she knew: it had never entered her mind that he had been young like other men; he had always been the old Squire at whom everybody was frightened. Oh, it was impossible to think how it would be! But Captain Donnithorne would know; he was a great gentleman, and could have his way in everything, and could buy everything he liked. And nothing could be as it had been again: perhaps some day she should be a grand lady, and ride in her coach, and dress for dinner in a brocaded silk, with feathers in her hair, and her dress sweeping the ground, like Miss Lydia and Lady Dacey, when she saw them going into the dining-room one evening, as she peeped through the little round window in the lobby; only she should not be old and ugly like Miss Lydia, or all the same thickness like Lady Dacey, but very pretty, with her hair done in a great many different ways, and sometimes in a pink dress, and sometimes in a white one — she didn't know which she liked best; and Mary Bürge and everybody would perhaps see her going out in her carriage — or rather, they would *hear* of it: it was impossible to imagine these things happening at Hayslope in sight of her aunt. At the thought of all this splendour, Hetty got up from her chair, and in doing so caught the little red-framed glass with the edge of her scarf, so that it fell with a bang on the floor; but she was too eagerly occupied with her vision to care about picking it up; and after a momentary start, began to pace with a pigeon-like stateliness backwards and forwards along her room, in her coloured stays and coloured skirt, and the old black lace scarf round her shoulders, and the great glass earrings in her ears.

How pretty the little puss looks in that odd dress! It would be the easiest folly in the world to fall in love with her: there is such a sweet baby-like roundness about her face and figure; the delicate dark rings of hair lie so charmingly about her ears and neck; her great dark eyes with their long eyelashes touch one so strangely, as if an imprisoned frisky sprite looked out of them.

Ah, what a prize the man gets who wins a sweet bride like Hetty! How the men envy him who come to the wedding breakfast, and see her hanging on his arm in her white lace and orange blossoms. The dear, young, round, soft, flexible thing! Her heart must be just as soft, her temper just as free from angles, her character just as pliant. If anything ever goes wrong, it must be the husband's fault there: he can make her what he likes — that is plain. And the lover himself thinks so too: the little darling is so fond of him, her little vanities are so bewitching, he wouldn't consent to her being a bit wiser; those kitten-like glances and movements are just what one wants to make one's hearth a paradise. Every man under such circumstances is conscious of being a great physiognomist. Nature, he knows, has a language of her own, which she uses with strict veracity, and he considers himself an adept in the language. Nature has written out his bride's character for him in those exquisite lines of cheek and lip and chin, in those eyelids delicate as petals, in those long lashes curled like the stamen of a flower, in the dark liquid depths of those wonderful eyes. How she will dote on her children! She is almost a child herself, and the little pink round things will hang about her like florets round the central flower; and the husband will look on, smiling benignly, able, whenever he chooses, to withdraw into the sanctuary of his wisdom, towards which his sweet wife will look reverently, and never lift the curtain. It is a marriage such as they made in the golden age, when the men were all wise and majestic, and the women all lovely and loving.

It was very much in this way that our friend Adam Bede thought about Hetty; only he put his thoughts into different words. If ever she behaved with cold vanity towards him, he said to himself, it is only because she doesn't love me well enough; and he was sure that her love, whenever she gave it, would be the most precious thing a man could possess on earth. Before you despise Adam as deficient in penetration, pray ask yourself if you were ever predisposed to believe evil of any pretty woman — if you ever *could,* without hard head-breaking demonstration, believe evil of the *one* supremely pretty woman who has bewitched you. No: people who love downy peaches are apt not to think of the stone, and sometimes jar their teeth terribly against it.

Arthur Donnithorne, too, had the same sort of notion about Hetty, so far as he had thought of her nature at all. He felt sure she was a dear, affectionate, good little thing. The man who awakes the wondering tremulous passion of a young girl always thinks her affectionate; and if he chances to look forward to future years, probably imagines himself being virtuously tender to her, because the poor thing is so clingingly fond of him. God made these dear women so — and it is a convenient arrangement in case of sickness.

After all, I believe the wisest of us must be beguiled in this way sometimes, and must think both better and worse of people than they deserve. Nature has her language, and she is not unveracious; but we don't know all the intricacies of her syntax just yet, and in a hasty reading we may happen to extract the very opposite of her real meaning. Long dark eyelashes, now: what can be more exquisite? I find it impossible not to expect some depth of soul behind a deep grey eye with a long dark eyelash, in spite of an experience which has shown me that they may go along with deceit, peculation,[3] and stupidity. But if, in the reaction of disgust, I have betaken myself to a fishy eye,[4] there has been a surprising similarity of result. One begins to suspect at length that there is no direct correlation between eyelashes and morals; or else, that the eyelashes express the disposition of the fair one's grandmother, which is on the whole less important to us.

No eyelashes could be more beautiful than Hetty's; and now, while she walks with her pigeon-like stateliness along the room and looks down on her shoulders bordered by the old black lace, the dark fringe shows to perfection on her pink cheek. They are but dim ill-defined pictures that her narrow bit of an imagination can make of the future; but of every picture she is the central figure in fine clothes; Captain Donnithorne is very close to her, putting his arm round her, perhaps kissing her, and everybody else is admiring and envying her — especially Mary Bürge, whose new print dress looks very contemptible by the side of Hetty's resplendent toilette. Does any sweet or sad memory mingle with this dream of the future — any loving thought of her second parents — of the children she had helped to tend — of any youthful companion, any pet animal, any relic of her own childhood even? Not one. There are some plants that have hardly any roots: you may tear them from their native nook of rock or wall, and just lay them over your ornamental flower-pot, and they blossom none the worse. Hetty could have cast all her past life behind her, and never cared to be reminded of it again. I think she had no feeling at all towards the old house, and did not like the Jacob's Ladder[5] and the long row of hollyhocks in the garden better than other flowers — perhaps not so well. It was wonderful how little she seemed to care about waiting on her uncle, who had been a good father to her: she hardly ever remembered to reach him his pipe at the right time without being told, unless a visitor happened to be there, who would have a better opportunity of seeing her as she walked across the hearth. Hetty did not understand how anybody could be very fond of middle-aged people. And as for those tiresome children, Marty and Tommy and Totty, they had been the very nuisance of her life — as bad as buzzing insects that will come teasing you on a hot day when you want to be quiet. Marty, the eldest, was a baby when she first came to the farm, for the children born before him had died, and so Hetty had had them all three, one after the other, toddling by her side in the meadow, or playing about her on wet days in the half-empty rooms of the large old house. The boys were out of hand now, but Totty was still a day-long plague, worse than either of the others had been, because there was more fuss made about her. And there was no end to the making and mending of clothes. Hetty would have been glad to hear that she should never see a child again; they were worse than the nasty little lambs that the shepherd was always bringing in to be taken special care of in lambing time; for the lambs *were* got rid of sooner or later. As for the young chickens and turkeys, Hetty would have hated the very word 'hatching', if her aunt had not bribed her to attend to the young poultry by promising her the proceeds of one out of every brood. The round downy chicks peeping out from under their mother's wing never touched Hetty with any pleasure; that was not the sort of prettiness she cared about, but she did care about the prettiness of the new things she would buy for herself at Treddleston fair with the money they fetched. And yet she looked so dimpled, so charming, as she stooped down to put the soaked bread under the hencoop, that you must have been a very acute personage indeed to suspect her of that hardness. Molly, the housemaid, with a turn-up nose and a protuberant jaw, was really a tenderhearted girl, and, as Mrs Poyser said, a jewel to look after the poultry; but her stolid face showed nothing of this maternal delight, any more than a brown earthenware pitcher will show the light of the lamp within it.

It is generally a feminine eye that first detects the moral deficiencies hidden under the 'dear deceit' of beauty: so it is not surprising that Mrs Poyser, with her keenness and abundant opportunity for observation, should have formed a tolerably fair estimate of what might be expected from Hetty in the way of feeling, and in moments of indignation she had sometimes spoken with great openness on the subject to her husband.

'She's no better than a peacock, as 'ud strut about on the wall, and spread its tail when the sun shone if all the folks i' the parish was dying: there's nothing seems to give her a turn i' th' inside, not even when we thought Totty had tumbled into the pit. To think o' that dear cherub! And we found her wi' her little shoes

stuck i' the mud and crying fit to break her heart by the far horse-pit. But Hetty niver minded it, I could see, though she's been at the nussin' o' the child ever since it was a babby. It's my belief her heart's as hard as a pebble.'

'Nay, nay,' said Mr Poyser, 'thee mustn't judge Hetty too hard. Them young gells are like th' unripe grain; they'll make good meal by-and-by, but they're squashy as yet. Thee't see Hetty '11 be all right when she's got a good husband and children of her own.'

'*I* don't want to be hard upo' the gell. She's got cliver fingers of her own, and can be useful enough when she likes, and I should miss her wi' the butter, for she's got a cool hand. An' let be what may, I'd strive to do my part by a niece o' yours, an' *that* I've done: for I've taught her everything as belongs to a house, an' I've told her her duty often enough, though, God knows, I've no breath to spare, an' that catchin' pain comes on dreadful by times. Wi' them three gells in the house I'd need have twice the strength, to keep 'em up to their work. It's like having roast-meat at three fires; as soon as you've basted one, another's burnin'.'

Hetty stood sufficiently in awe of her aunt to be anxious to conceal from her so much of her vanity as could be hidden without too great a sacrifice. She could not resist spending her money in bits of finery which Mrs Poyser disapproved; but she would have been ready to die with shame, vexation, and fright, if her aunt had this moment opened the door, and seen her with her bits of candle lighted, and strutting about decked in her scarf and earrings. To prevent such a surprise, she always bolted her door, and she had not forgotten to do so to-night. It was well: for there now came a light tap, and Hetty, with a leaping heart, rushed to blow out the candles and throw them into the drawer. She dared not stay to take out her earrings, but she threw off her scarf, and let it fall on the floor, before the light tap came again. We shall know how it was that the light tap came, if we leave Hetty for a short time, and return to Dinah, at the moment when she had delivered Totty to her mother's arms, and was come up-stairs to her bedroom, adjoining Hetty's.

Dinah delighted in her bedroom window. Being on the second story of that tall house, it gave her a wide view over the fields. The thickness of the wall formed a broad step about a yard below the window, where she could place her chair. And now the first thing she did, on entering her room, was to seat herself in this chair, and look out on the peaceful fields beyond which the large moon was rising, just above the hedgerow elms. She liked the pasture best where the milch cows[6] were lying, and next to that the meadow where the grass was half mown, and lay in silvered sweeping lines. Her heart was very full, for there was to be only one more night on which she would look out on those fields for a long time to come; but she thought little of leaving the mere scene, for, to her, bleak Snowfield had just as many charms: she thought of all the dear people whom she had learned to care for among these peaceful fields, and who would now have a place in her loving remembrance for ever. She thought of the struggles and the weariness that might lie before them in the rest of their life's journey, when she would be away from them, and know nothing of what was befalling them; and the pressure of this thought soon became too strong for her to enjoy the unresponding stillness of the moonlit fields. She closed her eyes, that she might feel more intensely the presence of a Love and Sympathy deeper and more tender than was breathed from the earth and sky. That was often Dinah's mode of praying in solitude. Simply to close her eyes, and to feel herself enclosed by the Divine Presence; then gradually her fears, her yearning anxieties for others, melted away like ice-crystals in a warm ocean. She had sat in this way perfectly still, with her hands crossed on her lap, and the pale light resting on her calm face, for at least ten minutes, when she was startled by a loud sound, apparently of something falling in Hetty's room. But like all sounds that fall on our ears in a state of abstraction, it had no distinct character, but was simply loud and startling, so that she felt uncertain whether she had interpreted it rightly. She rose and listened, but all was quiet afterwards, and she reflected that Hetty might merely have knocked something down in getting into bed. She began slowly to undress; but now, owing to the suggestions of this sound, her thought became concentrated on Hetty: that sweet young thing, with life and all its trials before her — the solemn daily duties of the wife and mother — and her mind so unprepared for them all; bent merely on little foolish, selfish pleasures, like a child hugging its toys in the beginning of a long toilsome journey, in which it will have to bear hunger and cold and unsheltered darkness. Dinah felt a double care for Hetty, because she shared Seth's anxious interest in his brother's lot, and she had not come to the conclusion that Hetty did not love Adam well enough to marry him. She saw too clearly the absence of any warm, self-devoting love in Hetty's nature, to regard the coldness of her behaviour towards Adam as any indication that he was not the man she would like to have for a husband. And this blank in Hetty's nature, instead of exciting Dinah's dislike, only touched her with a deeper pity: the lovely face and form affected her as beauty always affects a pure and tender mind, free from selfish jealousies: it was an excellent divine gift, that gave a deeper pathos to the need, the sin, the sorrow with which it was mingled, as the canker in a lily-white bud is more grievous to behold than in a common pot-herb.

By the time Dinah had undressed and put on her night-gown, this feeling about Hetty had gathered a painful intensity; her imagination had created a thorny thicket of sin and sorrow, in which she saw the poor

thing struggling torn and bleeding, looking with tears for rescue and finding none. It was in this way that Dinah's imagination and sympathy acted and reacted habitually, each heightening the other. She felt a deep longing to go now and pour into Hetty's ear all the words of tender warning and appeal that rushed into her mind. But perhaps Hetty was already asleep. Dinah put her ear to the partition, and heard still some slight noises, which convinced her that Hetty was not yet in bed. Still she hesitated; she was not quite certain of a divine direction; the voice that told her to go to Hetty seemed no stronger than the other voice which said that Hetty was weary, and that going to her now in an unseasonable moment would only tend to close her heart more obstinately. Dinah was not satisfied without a more unmistakable guidance than those inward voices. There was light enough for her, if she opened her Bible, to discern the text sufficiently to know what it would say to her. She knew the physiognomy of every page, and could tell on what book she opened, sometimes on what chapter, without seeing title or number. It was a small thick Bible, worn quite round at the edges. Dinah laid it sideways on the window ledge, where the light was strongest, and then opened it with her forefinger. The first words she looked at were those at the top of the left-hand page: 'And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him.' That was enough for Dinah; she had opened on that memorable parting at Ephesus, when Paul had felt bound to open his heart in a last exhortation and warning.[7] She hesitated no longer, but, opening her own door gently, went and tapped at Hetty's. We know she had to tap twice, because Hetty had to put out her candles and throw off her black lace scarf; but after the second tap the door was opened immediately. Dinah said, 'Will you let me come in, Hetty?' and Hetty, without speaking, for she was confused and vexed, opened the door wider and let her in.

What a strange contrast the two figures made! Visible enough in that mingled twilight and moonlight. Hetty, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glistening from her imaginary drama, her beautiful neck and arms bare, her hair hanging in a curly tangle down her back, and the baubles in her ears. Dinah, covered with her long white dress, her pale face full of subdued emotion, almost like a lovely corpse into which the soul has returned charged with sublimer secrets and a sublimer love. They were nearly of the same height; Dinah evidently a little the taller as she put her arm round Hetty's waist, and kissed her forehead.

'I knew you were not in bed, my dear,' she said, in her sweet clear voice, which was irritating to Hetty, mingling with her own peevish vexation like music with jangling chains, 'for I heard you moving; and I longed to speak to you again to-night, for it is the last but one that I shall be here, and we don't know what may happen to-morrow to keep us apart. Shall I sit down with you while you do up your hair?'

'Oh yes,' said Hetty, hastily turning round and reaching the second chair in the room, glad that Dinah looked as if she did not notice her earrings.

Dinah sat down, and Hetty began to brush together her hair before twisting it up, doing it with that air of excessive indifference which belongs to confused self-consciousness. But the expression of Dinah's eyes gradually relieved her; they seemed unobservant of all details.

'Dear Hetty,' she said, 'it has been borne in upon my mind to-night that you may some day be in trouble — trouble is appointed for us all here below,[8] and there comes a time when we need more comfort and help than the things of this life[9] can give. I want to tell you that if ever you are in trouble, and need a friend that will always feel for you and love you, you have got that friend in Dinah Morris at Snowfield; and if you come to her, or send for her, she'll never forget this night and the words she is speaking to you now. Will you remember it, Hetty?'

'Yes,' said Hetty, rather frightened. 'But why should you think I shall be in trouble? Do you know of anything?'

Hetty had seated herself as she tied on her cap, and now Dinah leaned forwards and took her hands as she answered –

'Because, dear, trouble comes to us all in this life: we set our hearts on things which it isn't God's will for us to have,[10] and then we go sorrowing; the people we love are taken from us, and we can joy in nothing because they are not with us; sickness comes, and we faint under the burden of our feeble bodies; we go astray and do wrong, and bring ourselves into trouble with our fellow-men. There is no man or woman born into this world to whom some of these trials do not fall, and so I feel that some of them must happen to you; and I desire for you, that while you are young you should seek for strength from your Heavenly Father, that you may have a support which will not fail you in the evil day.'[11]

Dinah paused and released Hetty's hands, that she might not hinder her. Hetty sat quite still; she felt no response within herself to Dinah's anxious affection; but Dinah's words, uttered with solemn pathetic distinctness, affected her with a chill fear. Her flush had died away almost to paleness; she had the timidity of a luxurious pleasure-seeking nature, which shrinks from the hint of pain. Dinah saw the effect, and her tender anxious pleading became the more earnest, till Hetty, full of a vague fear that something evil was some time to befall her, began to cry.

It is our habit to say that while the lower nature can never understand the higher, the higher nature commands a complete view of the lower. But I think the higher nature has to learn this comprehension, as we learn the art of vision, by a good deal of hard experience, often with bruises and gashes incurred in taking things up by the wrong end, and fancying our space wider than it is. Dinah had never seen Hetty affected in this way before, and, with her usual benignant hopefulness, she trusted it was the stirring of a divine impulse. She kissed the sobbing thing, and began to cry with her for grateful joy. But Hetty was simply in that excitable state of mind in which there is no calculating what turn the feelings may take from one moment to another, and for the first time she became irritated under Dinah's caress. She pushed her away impatiently, and said, with a childish sobbing voice –

'Don't talk to me so, Dinah. Why do you come to frighten me? I've never done anything to you. Why can't you let me be?'

Poor Dinah felt a pang. She was too wise to persist, and only said mildly, 'Yes, my dear, you're tired; I won't hinder you any longer. Make haste and get into bed. Good-night.'

She went out of the room almost as quietly and quickly as if she had been a ghost; but once by the side of her own bed, she threw herself on her knees, and poured out in deep silence all the passionate pity that filled her heart.

As for Hetty, she was soon in the wood again — her waking dreams being merged in a sleeping life scarcely more fragmentary and confused.

CHAPTER XVI

Links

Arthur Donnithorne, you remember, is under an engagement with himself to go and see Mr Irwine this Friday morning, and he is awake and dressing so early, that he determines to go before breakfast, instead of after. The Rector, he knows, breakfasts alone at half-past nine, the ladies of the family having a different breakfast-hour; Arthur will have an early ride over the hill and breakfast with him. One can say everything best over a meal.

The progress of civilization has made a breakfast or a dinner an easy and cheerful substitute for more troublesome and disagreeable ceremonies. We take a less gloomy view of our errors now our father confessor listens to us over his egg and coffee. We are more distinctly conscious that rude penances are out of the question for gentlemen in an enlightened age, and that mortal sin is not incompatible with an appetite for muffins. An assault on our pockets, which in more barbarous times would have been made in the brusque form of a pistol-shot, is quite a well-bred and smiling procedure now it has become a request for a loan thrown in as an easy parenthesis between the second and third glasses of claret.

Still, there was this advantage in the old rigid forms, that they committed you to the fulfilment of a resolution by some outward deed: when you have put your mouth to one end of a hole in a stone wall, and are aware that there is an expectant ear at the other end,[1] you are more likely to say what you came out with the intention of saying, than if you were seated with your legs in an easy attitude under the mahogany, with a companion who will have no reason to be surprised if you have nothing particular to say.

However, Arthur Donnithorne, as he winds among the pleasant lanes on horseback in the morning sunshine, has a sincere determination to open his heart to the Rector, and the swirling sound of the scythe as he passes by the meadow is all the pleasanter to him because of this honest purpose. He is glad to see the promise of settled weather now, for getting in the hay, about which the farmers have been fearful; and there is something so healthful in the sharing of a joy that is general and not merely personal, that this thought about the hay-harvest reacts on his state of mind, and makes his resolution seem an easier matter. A man about town might perhaps consider that these influences were not to be felt out of a child's storybook; but when you are among the fields and hedgerows, it is impossible to maintain a consistent superiority to simple natural pleasures.

Arthur had passed the village of Hayslope, and was approaching the Broxton side of the hill, when, at a turning in the road, he saw a figure about a hundred yards before him which it was impossible to mistake for any one else than Adam Bede, even if there had been no grey, tailless shepherd-dog at his heels. He was striding along at his usual rapid pace; and Arthur pushed on his horse to overtake him, for he retained too much of his boyish feeling for Adam to miss an opportunity of chatting with him. I will not say that his love for that good fellow did not owe some of its force to the love of patronage: our friend Arthur liked to do everything that was handsome, and to have his handsome deeds recognized.

Adam looked round as he heard the quickening clatter of the horse's heels, and waited for the horseman, lifting his paper cap from his head with a bright smile of recognition. Next to his own brother Seth, Adam would have done more for Arthur Donnithorne than for any other young man in the world. There was hardly anything he would not rather have lost than the two-feet ruler which he always carried in his pocket; it was Arthur's present, bought with his pocket-money when he was a fair-haired lad of eleven, and when he had profited so well by Adam's lessons in carpentering and turning, as to embarrass every female in the house with gifts of superfluous thread-reels and round boxes. Adam had quite a pride in the little squire in those early days, and the feeling had only become slightly modified as the fair-haired lad had grown into the whiskered young man. Adam, I confess, was very susceptible to the influence of rank, and quite ready to give an extra amount of respect to every one who had more advantages than himself, not being a philosopher, or a prolétaire with democratic ideas,[2] but simply a stout-limbed clever carpenter with a large fund of reverence in his nature, which inclined him to admit all established claims unless he saw very clear grounds for questioning them. He had no theories about setting the world to rights, but he saw there was a great deal of damage done by building with ill-seasoned timber — by ignorant men in fine clothes making plans for outhouses and workshops and the like, without knowing the bearings of things —

by slovenly joiners' work, and by hasty contracts that could never be fulfilled without ruining somebody; and he resolved, for his part, to set his face against such doings. On these points he would have maintained his opinion against the largest landed proprietor in Loamshire or Stonyshire either; but he felt that beyond these it would be better for him to defer to people who were more knowing than himself. He saw as plainly as possible how ill the woods on the estate were managed, and the shameful state of the farm-buildings; and if old Squire Donnithorne had asked him the effect of this mismanagement, he would have spoken his opinion without flinching, but the impulse to a respectful demeanour towards a 'gentleman' would have been strong within him all the while. The word 'gentleman' had a spell for Adam, and, as he often said, he 'couldn't abide a fellow who thought he made himself fine by being coxy to's betters'. I must remind you again that Adam had the blood of the peasant in his veins, and that since he was in his prime half a century ago, you must expect some of his characteristics to be obsolete.

Towards the young squire this instinctive reverence of Adam's was assisted by boyish memories and personal regard; so you may imagine that he thought far more of Arthur's good qualities, and attached far more value to very slight actions of his, than if they had been the qualities and actions of a common workman like himself. He felt sure it would be a fine day for everybody about Hayslope when the young squire came into the estate — such a generous open-hearted disposition as he had, and an 'uncommon' notion about improvements and repairs, considering he was only just coming of age. Thus there was both respect and affection in the smile with which he raised his paper cap as Arthur Donnithorne rode up.

'Well, Adam, how are you?' said Arthur, holding out his hand. He never shook hands with any of the farmers, and Adam felt the honour keenly. 'I could swear to your back a long way off. It's just the same back, only broader, as when you used to carry me on it. Do you remember?'

'Ay, sir, I remember. It 'ud be a poor look-out if folks didn't remember what they did and said when they were lads. We should think no more about old friends than we do about new uns, then.'

'You're going to Broxton, I suppose?' said Arthur, putting his horse on at a slow pace while Adam walked by his side. 'Are you going to the Rectory?'

'No, sir, I'm going to see about Bradwell's barn. They're afraid of the roof pushing the walls out; and I'm going to see what can be done with it before we send the stuff and the workmen.'

'Why, Bürge trusts almost everything to you now, Adam, doesn't he? I should think he will make you his partner soon. He will, if he's wise.'

'Nay, sir, I don't see as he'd be much the better off for that. A foreman, if he's got a conscience, and delights in his work, will do his business as well as if he was a partner. I wouldn't give a penny for a man as 'ud drive a nail in slack because he didn't get extra pay for it.'

'I know that, Adam; I know you work for him as well as if you were working for yourself. But you would have more power than you have now, and could turn the business to better account perhaps. The old man must give up his business some time, and he has no son; I suppose he'll want a son-in-law who can take to it. But he has rather grasping fingers of his own, I fancy: I daresay he wants a man who can put some money into the business. If I were not as poor as a rat, I would gladly invest some money in that way, for the sake of having you settled on the estate. I'm sure I should profit by it in the end. And perhaps I shall be better off in a year or two. I shall have a larger allowance now I'm of age; and when I've paid off a debt or two, I shall be able to look about me.'

'You're very good to say so, sir, and I'm not unthankful. But' — Adam continued, in a decided tone — 'I shouldn't like to make any offers to Mr Bürge, or t' have any made for me. I see no clear road to a partnership. If he should ever want to dispose of the business, that 'ud be a different matter. I should be glad of some money at a fair interest then, for I feel sure I could pay it off in time.'

'Very well, Adam,' said Arthur, remembering what Mr Irwine had said about a probable hitch in the love-making between Adam and Mary Bürge, 'we'll say no more about it at present. When is your father to be buried?'

'On Sunday, sir; Mr Irwine's coming earlier on purpose. I shall be glad when it's over, for I think my mother 'ull perhaps get easier then. It cuts one sadly to see the grief of old people; they've no way o' working it off; and the new spring brings no new shoots out on the withered tree.'

'Ah, you've had a good deal of trouble and vexation in your life, Adam. I don't think you've ever been harebrained and light-hearted, like other youngsters. You've always had some care on your mind.'

'Why, yes, sir; but that's nothing to make a fuss about. If we're men, and have men's feelings, I reckon we must have men's troubles. We can't be like the birds, as fly from their nest as soon as they've got their wings, and never know their kin when they see 'em, and get a fresh lot every year. I've had enough to be thankful for: I've allays had health and strength and brains to give me a delight in my work; and I count it a great thing as I've had Bartle Massey's night-school to go to. He's helped me to knowledge I could never ha'

got by myself.'

'What a rare fellow you are, Adam!' said Arthur, after a pause, in which he had looked musingly at the big fellow walking by his side. 'I could hit out better than most men at Oxford, and yet I believe you would knock me into next week if I were to have a battle with you.'

'God forbid I should ever do that, sir,' said Adam, looking round at Arthur, and smiling. 'I used to fight for fun; but I've never done that since I was the cause o' poor Gil Tranter being laid up for a fortnight. I'll never fight any man again, only when he behaves like a scoundrel. If you get hold of a chap that's got no shame nor conscience to stop him, you must try what you can do by bunging his eyes up.'

Arthur did not laugh, for he was preoccupied with some thought that made him say presently –

'I should think now, Adam, you never have any struggles within yourself. I fancy you would master a wish that you had made up your mind it was not quite right to indulge, as easily as you would knock down a drunken fellow who was quarrelsome with you. I mean, you are never shilly-shally, first making up your mind that you won't do a thing, and then doing it after all?'

'Well,' said Adam, slowly, after a moment's hesitation — 'no. I don't remember ever being see-saw in that way, when I'd made my mind up, as you say, that a thing was wrong. It takes the taste out o' my mouth for things, when I know I should have a heavy conscience after 'em. I've seen pretty clear, ever since I could cast up a sum, as you can never do what's wrong without breeding sin and trouble more than you can ever see. It's like a bit o' bad workmanship — you never see th' end o' the mischief it'll do. And it's a poor look-out to come into the world to make your fellow-creatures worse off instead o' better. But there's a difference between the things folks call wrong. I'm not for making a sin of every little fool's trick, or bit o' nonsense anybody may be let into, like some o' them dissenters. And a man may have two minds whether it isn't worth while to get a bruise or two for the sake of a bit o' fun. But it isn't my way to be see-saw about anything: I think my fault lies th' other way. When I've said a thing, if it's only to myself, it's hard for me to go back.'

'Yes, that's just what I expected of you,' said Arthur. 'You've got an iron will, as well as an iron arm. But however strong a man's resolution may be, it costs him something to carry it out, now and then. We may determine not to gather any cherries, and keep our hands sturdily in our pockets, but we can't prevent our mouths from watering.'

'That's true, sir; but there's nothing like settling with ourselves as there's a deal we must do without i' this life. It's no use looking on life as if it was Treddles'on fair, where folks only go to see shows and get fairings.[3] If we do, we shall find it different. But where's the use o' me talking to you, sir? You know better than I do.'

'I'm not so sure of that, Adam. You've had four or five years of experience more than I've had, and I think your life has been a better school to you than college has been to me.'

'Why, sir, you seem to think o' college something like what Bartle Massey does. He says college mostly makes people like bladders — just good for nothing but t' hold the stuff as is poured into 'em. But he's got a tongue like a sharp blade, Bartle has: it never touches anything but it cuts. Here's the turning, sir. I must bid you good-morning, as you're going to the Rectory.'

'Good-bye, Adam, good-bye.'

Arthur gave his horse to the groom at the Rectory gate, and walked along the gravel towards the door which opened on the garden. He knew that the Rector always breakfasted in his study, and the study lay on the left hand of this door, opposite the dining-room. It was a small low room, belonging to the old part of the house — dark with the sombre covers of the books that lined the walls; yet it looked very cheery this morning as Arthur reached the open window. For the morning sun fell aslant on the great glass globe with gold fish in it, which stood on a scagliola pillar[4] in front of the ready-spread bachelor breakfast-table, and by the side of this breakfast-table was a group which would have made any room enticing. In the crimson damask easy-chair sat Mr Irwine, with that radiant freshness which he always had when he came from his morning toilet; his finely-formed plump white hand was playing along Juno's brown curly back; and close to Juno's tail, which was wagging with calm matronly pleasure, the two brown pups were rolling over each other in an ecstatic duet of worrying noises. On a cushion a little removed sat Pug, with the air of a maiden lady, who looked on these familiarities as animal weaknesses, which she made as little show as possible of observing. On the table, at Mr Irwine's elbow, lay the first volume of the Foulis Æschylus,[5] which Arthur knew well by sight; and the silver coffee-pot, which Carroll was bringing in, sent forth a fragrant steam which completed the delights of a bachelor breakfast.

'Hallo, Arthur, that's a good fellow! You're just in time,' said Mr Irwine, as Arthur paused and stepped in over the low window-sill. 'Carroll, we shall want more coffee and eggs, and haven't you got some cold fowl for us to eat with that ham? Why, this is like old days, Arthur; you haven't been to breakfast with me these

five years.'

'It was a tempting morning for a ride before breakfast,' said Arthur; 'and I used to like breakfasting with you so when I was reading with you. My grandfather is always a few degrees colder at breakfast than at any other hour in the day. I think his morning bath doesn't agree with him.'

Arthur was anxious not to imply that he came with any special purpose. He had no sooner found himself in Mr Irwine's presence than the confidence which he had thought quite easy before, suddenly appeared the most difficult thing in the world to him, and at the very moment of shaking hands he saw his purpose in quite a new light. How could he make Irwine understand his position unless he told him those little scenes in the wood; and how could he tell them without looking like a fool? And then his weakness in coming back from Gawaine's, and doing the very opposite of what he intended! Irwine would think him a shilly-shally fellow ever after. However, it must come out in an unpremeditated way; the conversation might lead up to it.

'I like breakfast-time better than any other moment in the day,' said Mr Irwine. 'No dust has settled on one's mind then, and it presents a clear mirror to the rays of things. I always have a favourite book by me at breakfast, and I enjoy the bits I pick up then so much, that regularly every morning it seems to me as if I should certainly become studious again. But presently Dent brings up a poor fellow who has killed a hare, and when I've got through my "justicing", as Carroll calls it, I'm inclined for a ride round the glebe,[6] and on my way back I meet with the master of the workhouse, who has got a long story of a mutinous pauper to tell me; and so the day goes on, and I'm always the same lazy fellow before evening sets in. Besides, one wants the stimulus of sympathy, and I have never had that since poor D'Oyley left Treddleston. If you had stuck to your books well, you rascal, I should have had a pleasanter prospect before me. But scholarship doesn't run in your family blood.'

'No indeed. It's well if I can remember a little inapplicable Latin to adorn my maiden speech in Parliament six or seven years hence. "Cras ingens iterabimus aequor",[7] and a few shreds of that sort, will perhaps stick to me, and I shall arrange my opinions so as to introduce them. But I don't think a knowledge of the classics is a pressing want to a country gentleman; as far as I can see, he'd much better have a knowledge of manures. I've been reading your friend Arthur Young's books[8] lately, and there's nothing I should like better than to carry out some of his ideas in putting the farmers on a better management of their land; and, as he says, making what was a wild country, all of the same dark hue, bright and variegated with corn and cattle. My grandfather will never let me have any power while he lives; but there's nothing I should like better than to undertake the Stonyshire side of the estate — it's in a dismal condition — and set improvements on foot, and gallop about from one place to another and overlook them. I should like to know all the labourers, and see them touching their hats to me with a look of goodwill.'

'Bravo, Arthur! a man who has no feeling for the classics couldn't make a better apology for coming into the world than by increasing the quantity of food to maintain scholars — and rectors who appreciate scholars. And whenever you enter on your career of model landlord may I be there to see. You'll want a portly rector to complete the picture, and take his tithe[9] of all the respect and honour you get by your hard work. Only don't set your heart too strongly on the goodwill you are to get in consequence. I'm not sure that men are the fondest of those who try to be useful to them. You know Gawaine has got the curses of the whole neighbourhood upon him about that enclosure. You must make it quite clear to your mind which you are most bent upon, old boy — popularity or usefulness – else you may happen to miss both.'

'Oh! Gawaine is harsh in his manners; he doesn't make himself personally agreeable to his tenants. I don't believe there's anything you can't prevail on people to do with kindness. For my part, I couldn't live in a neighbourhood where I was not respected and beloved; and it's very pleasant to go among the tenants here, they seem all so well inclined to me. I suppose it seems only the other day to them since I was a little lad, riding on a pony about as big as a sheep. And if fair allowances were made to them, and their buildings attended to, one could persuade them to farm on a better plan, stupid as they are.'

'Then mind you fall in love in the right place, and don't get a wife who will drain your purse and make you niggardly in spite of yourself. My mother and I have a little discussion about you sometimes: she says, "I'll never risk a single prophecy on Arthur until I see the woman he falls in love with." She thinks your lady-love will rule you as the moon rules the tides. But I feel bound to stand up for you, as my pupil, you know; and I maintain that you're not of that watery quality. So mind you don't disgrace my judgment.'

Arthur winced under this speech, for keen old Mrs Irwine's opinion about him had the disagreeable effect of a sinister omen. This, to be sure, was only another reason for persevering in his intention, and getting an additional security against himself. Nevertheless, at this point in the conversation, he was conscious of increased disinclination to tell his story about Hetty. He was of an impressible nature, and lived a great deal in other people's opinions and feelings concerning himself; and the mere fact that he was in the presence of an intimate friend, who had not the slightest notion that he had had any such serious internal struggle as he

came to confide, rather shook his own belief in the seriousness of the struggle. It was not, after all, a thing to make a fuss about; and what could Irwine do for him that he could not do for himself? He would go to Eagledale in spite of Meg's lameness — go on Rattler, and let Pym follow as well as he could on the old hack. That was his thought as he sugared his coffee; but the next minute, as he was lifting the cup to his lips, he remembered how thoroughly he had made up his mind last night to tell Irwine. No! he would not be vacillating again — he *would* do what he had meant to do, this time. So it would be well not to let the personal tone of the conversation altogether drop. If they went to quite indifferent topics, his difficulty would be heightened. It had required no noticeable pause for this rush and rebound of feeling, before he answered –

'But I think it is hardly an argument against a man's general strength of character, that he should be apt to be mastered by love. A fine constitution doesn't insure one against small-pox or any other of those inevitable diseases. A man may be very firm in other matters, and yet be under a sort of witchery from a woman.'

'Yes; but there's this difference between love and small-pox, or bewitchment either — that if you detect the disease at an early stage and try change of air, there is every chance of complete escape without any further development of symptoms. And there are certain alterative doses which a man may administer to himself by keeping unpleasant consequences before his mind: this gives you a sort of smoked glass through which you may look at the resplendent fair one and discern her true outline; though I'm afraid, by the by, the smoked glass is apt to be missing just at the moment it is most wanted. I daresay, now, even a man fortified with a knowledge of the classics might be lured into an imprudent marriage, in spite of the warning given him by the chorus in the Prometheus.'[10]

The smile that flitted across Arthur's face was a faint one, and instead of following Mr Irwine's playful lead, he said, quite seriously — 'Yes, that's the worst of it. It's a desperately vexatious thing, that after all one's reflections and quiet determinations, we should be ruled by moods that one can't calculate on beforehand. I don't think a man ought to be blamed so much if he is betrayed into doing things in that way, in spite of his resolutions.'

'Ah, but the moods lie in his nature, my boy, just as much as his reflections did, and more. A man can never do anything at variance with his own nature. He carries within him the germ of his most exceptional action; and if we wise people make eminent fools of ourselves on any particular occasion, we must endure the legitimate conclusion that we carry a few grains of folly to our ounce of wisdom.'

'Well, but one may be betrayed into doing things by a combination of circumstances, which one might never have done otherwise.'

'Why, yes, a man can't very well steal a bank-note unless the bank-note lies within convenient reach; but he won't make us think him an honest man because he begins to howl at the bank-note for falling in his way.'

'But surely you don't think a man who struggles against a temptation into which he falls at last, as bad as the man who never struggles at all?'

'No, certainly; I pity him in proportion to his struggles, for they foreshadow the inward suffering which is the worst form of Nemesis.[11] Consequences are unpitying. Our deeds carry their terrible consequences, quite apart from any fluctuations that went before — consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves. And it is best to fix our minds on that certainty, instead of considering what may be the elements of excuse for us. But I never knew you so inclined for moral discussion, Arthur? Is it some danger of your own that you are considering in this philosophical, general way?'

In asking this question, Mr Irwine pushed his plate away, threw himself back in his chair, and looked straight at Arthur. He really suspected that Arthur wanted to tell him something, and thought of smoothing the way for him by this direct question. But he was mistaken. Brought suddenly and involuntarily to the brink of confession, Arthur shrank back, and felt less disposed towards it than ever. The conversation had taken a more serious tone than he had intended — it would quite mislead Irwine — he would imagine there was a deep passion for Hetty, while there was no such thing. He was conscious of colouring, and was annoyed at his boyishness.

'Oh no, no danger,' he said as indifferently as he could. 'I don't know that I am more liable to irresolution than other people; only there are little incidents now and then that set one speculating on what might happen in the future.'

Was there a motive at work under this strange reluctance of Arthur's which had a sort of backstairs influence, not admitted to himself? Our mental business is carried on much in the same way as the business of the State: a great deal of hard work is done by agents who are not acknowledged. In a piece of machinery, too, I believe there is often a small unnoticeable wheel which has a great deal to do with the

motion of the large obvious ones. Possibly there was some such unrecognized agent secretly busy in Arthur's mind at this moment — possibly it was the fear lest he might hereafter find the fact of having made a confession to the Rector a serious annoyance, in case he should *not* be able quite to carry out his good resolutions? I dare not assert that it was not so. The human soul is a very complex thing.

The idea of Hetty had just crossed Mr Irwine's mind as he looked inquiringly at Arthur, but his disclaiming, indifferent answer confirmed the thought which had quickly followed – that there could be nothing serious in that direction. There was no probability that Arthur ever saw her except at church, and at her own home under the eye of Mrs Poyser; and the hint he had given Arthur about her the other day had no more serious meaning than to prevent him from noticing her so as to rouse the little chit's vanity, and in this way perturb the rustic drama of her life. Arthur would soon join his regiment, and be far away: no, there could be no danger in that quarter, even if Arthur's character had not been a strong security against it. His honest, patronizing pride in the goodwill and respect of everybody about him was a safeguard even against foolish romance, still more against a lower kind of folly. If there had been anything special on Arthur's mind in the previous conversation, it was clear he was not inclined to enter into details, and Mr Irwine was too delicate to imply even a friendly curiosity. He perceived a change of subject would be welcome, and said –

'By the way, Arthur, at your colonel's birthday *féte* there were some transparencies that made a great effect in honour of Britannia, and Pitt, and the Loamshire Militia, and, above all, the "generous youth",[12] the hero of the day. Don't you think you should get up something of the same sort to astonish our weak minds?'

The opportunity was gone. While Arthur was hesitating, the rope to which he might have clung had drifted away — he must trust now to his own swimming.

In ten minutes from that time, Mr Irwine was called for on business, and Arthur, bidding him good-bye, mounted his horse again with a sense of dissatisfaction, which he tried to quell by determining to set off for Eagledale without an hour's delay.

BOOK SECOND

CHAPTER XVII

In Which the Story Pauses a Little[1]

‘This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!’ I hear one of my readers exclaim. ‘How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice. You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things — quite as good as reading a sermon.’

Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking; I might select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.

Sixty years ago — it is a long time, so no wonder things have changed — all clergymen were not zealous; indeed there is reason to believe that the number of zealous clergymen was small, and it is probable that if one among the small minority had owned the livings of Broxton and Hayslope in the year 1799, you would have liked him no better than you like Mr Irwine. Ten to one, you would have thought him a tasteless, indiscreet, methodistical man. It is so very rarely that facts hit that nice medium required by our own enlightened opinions and refined taste! Perhaps you will say, ‘Do improve the facts a little, then; make them more accordant with those correct views which it is our privilege to possess. The world is not just what we like; do touch it up with a tasteful pencil, and make believe it is not quite such a mixed entangled affair. Let all people who hold unexceptionable opinions act unexceptionably. Let your most faulty characters always be on the wrong side, and your virtuous ones on the right. Then we shall see at a glance whom we are to condemn, and whom we are to approve. Then we shall be able to admire, without the slightest disturbance of our prepossessions: we shall hate and despise with that true ruminant relish which belongs to undoubting confidence.’

But, my good friend, what will you do then with your fellow-parishioner who opposes your husband in the vestry? — with your newly-appointed vicar, whose style of preaching you find painfully below that of his regretted predecessor? — with the honest servant who worries your soul with her one failing? – with your neighbour, Mrs Green, who was really kind to you in your last illness, but has said several ill-natured things about you since your convalescence? — nay, with your excellent husband himself, who has other irritating habits besides that of not wiping his shoes? These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people — amongst whom your life is passed — that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people, whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire — for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience. And I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this, in which we get up in the morning to do our daily work, that you would be likely to turn a harder, colder eye on the dusty streets and the common green fields – on the real breathing men and women, who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice; who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken, brave justice.

So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one’s best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. The pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin – the longer the claws, and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvellous facility which we mistook for

genius is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion. Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings — much harder than to say something fine about them which is *not* the exact truth.

It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings,[2] which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her; — or I turn to that village wedding, kept between four brown walls, where an awkward bridegroom opens the dance with a high-shouldered, broad-faced bride, while elderly and middle-aged friends look on, with very irregular noses and lips, and probably with quart-pots in their hands, but with an expression of unmistakable contentment and goodwill. 'Foh!' says my idealistic friend, 'what vulgar details! What good is there in taking all these pains to give an exact likeness of old women and clowns? What a low phase of life! — what clumsy, ugly people!'

But bless us, things may be lovable that are not altogether handsome, I hope? I am not at all sure that the majority of the human race have not been ugly, and even among those 'lords of their kind', the British, squat figures, ill-shapen nostrils, and dingy complexions are not startling exceptions. Yet there is a great deal of family love amongst us. I have a friend or two whose class of features is such that the Apollo curl on the summit of their brows would be decidedly trying; yet to my certain knowledge tender hearts have beaten for them, and their miniatures — flattering, but still not lovely — are kissed in secret by motherly lips. I have seen many an excellent matron, who could never in her best days have been handsome, and yet she had a packet of yellow love-letters in a private drawer, and sweet children showered kisses on her sallow cheeks. And I believe there have been plenty of young heroes, of middle stature and feeble beards, who have felt quite sure they could never love anything more insignificant than a Diana,[3] and yet have found themselves in middle life happily settled with a wife who waddles. Yes! thank God; human feeling is like the mighty rivers that bless the earth: it does not wait for beauty — it flows with resistless force and brings beauty with it.

All honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form! Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women, and children — in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy. Paint us an angel, if you can, with a floating violet robe, and a face paled by the celestial light; paint us yet oftener a Madonna, turning her mild face upward and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory; but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house,[4] those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world — those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions. In this world there are so many of these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore let Art always remind us of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things — men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them. There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my everyday fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy. Neither are picturesque lazzaroni[5] or romantic criminals half so frequent as your common labourer, who gets his own bread, and eats it vulgarly but creditably with his own pocket-knife. It is more needful that I should have a fibre of sympathy connecting me with that vulgar citizen who weighs out my sugar in a vilely-assorted cravat and waistcoat, than with the handsomest rascal in red scarf and green feathers; – more needful that my heart should swell with loving admiration at some trait of gentle goodness in the faulty people who sit at the same hearth with me, or in the clergyman of my own parish, who is perhaps rather too corpulent, and in other respects is not an Oberlin or a Tillotson,[6] than at the deeds of heroes whom I shall never know except by hearsay, or at the sublimest abstract of all clerical graces that was ever conceived by an able novelist.

And so I come back to Mr Irwine, with whom I desire you to be in perfect charity, far as he may be from

satisfying your demands on the clerical character. Perhaps you think he was not — as he ought to have been — a living demonstration of the benefits attached to a national church? But I am not sure of that; at least I know that the people in Broxton and Hayslope would have been very sorry to part with their clergyman, and that most faces brightened at his approach; and until it can be proved that hatred is a better thing for the soul than love, I must believe that Mr Irwine's influence in his parish was a more wholesome one than that of the zealous Mr Ryde, who came there twenty years afterwards, when Mr Irwine had been gathered to his fathers. It is true, Mr Ryde insisted strongly on the doctrines of the Reformation,[7] visited his flock a great deal in their own homes, and was severe in rebuking the aberrations of the flesh — put a stop, indeed, to the Christmas rounds of the church singers, as promoting drunkenness, and too light a handling of sacred things. But I gathered from Adam Bede, to whom I talked of these matters in his old age, that few clergymen could be less successful in winning the hearts of their parishioners than Mr Ryde. They learned a great many notions about doctrine from him, so that almost every churchgoer under fifty began to distinguish as well between the genuine gospel and what did not come precisely up to that standard, as if he had been born and bred a Dissenter; and for some time after his arrival there seemed to be quite a religious movement in that quiet rural district. 'But,' said Adam, 'I've seen pretty clear, ever since I was a young un, as religion's something else besides notions. It isn't notions sets people doing the right thing — it's feelings. It's the same with the notions in religion as it is with math'matics, — a man may be able to work problems straight off in's head as he sits by the fire and smokes his pipe; but if he has to make a machine or a building, he must have a will and a resolution, and love something else better than his own ease. Somehow, the congregation began to fall off, and people began to speak light o' Mr Ryde. I believe he meant right at bottom; but, you see, he was sourish-tempered, and was for beating down prices with the people as worked for him; and his preaching wouldn't go down well with that sauce. And he wanted to be like my lord judge i' the parish, punishing folks for doing wrong; and he scolded 'em from the pulpit as if he'd been a Ranter, and yet he couldn't abide the Dissenters, and was a deal more set against 'em than Mr Irwine was. And then he didn't keep within his income, for he seemed to think at first go-off that six hundred a-year was to make him as big a man as Mr Donnithorne: that's a sore mischief I've often seen with the poor curates jumping into a bit of a living all of a sudden. Mr Ryde was a deal thought on at a distance, I believe, and he wrote books; but as for math'matics and the natur o' things he was as ignorant as a woman. He was very knowing about doctrines, and used to call 'em the bulwarks of the Reformation; but I've always mistrusted that sort o' learning as leaves folks foolish and unreasonable about business. Now Mester Irwine was as different as could be: as quick! — he understood what you meant in a minute; and he knew all about building, and could see when you'd made a good job. And he behaved as much like a gentleman to the farmers, and th' old women and the labourers, as he did to the gentry. You never saw *him* interfering and scolding, and trying to play th' emperor. Ah! he was a fine man as ever you set eyes on; and so kind to's mother and sisters. That poor sickly Miss Anne — he seemed to think more of her than of anybody else in the world. There wasn't a soul in the parish had a word to say against him; and his servants stayed with him till they were so old and pottering, he had to hire other folks to do their work.'

'Well,' I said, 'that was an excellent way of preaching in the week-days; but I daresay, if your old friend Mr Irwine were to come to life again, and get into the pulpit next Sunday, you would be rather ashamed that he didn't preach better after all your praise of him.'

'Nay, nay,' said Adam, broadening his chest and throwing himself back in his chair, as if he were ready to meet all inferences, 'nobody has ever heard me say Mr Irwine was much of a preacher. He didn't go into deep speritial experience; and I know there's a deal in a man's inward life as you can't measure by the square, and say, "Do this and that '11 follow", and, "Do that and this '11 follow." There's things go on in the soul, and times when feelings come into you like a rushing mighty wind, as the Scripture says, and part your life in two a'most, so as you look back on yourself as if you was somebody else. Those are things as you can't bottle up in a "do this" and "do that"; and I'll go so far with the strongest Methodist ever you'll find. That shows me there's deep speritial things in religion. You can't make much out wi' talking about it, but you feel it. Mr Irwine didn't go into those things: he preached short moral sermons, and that was all. But then he acted pretty much up to what he said; he didn't set up for being so different from other folks one day, and then be as like 'em as two peas the next. And he made folks love him and respect him, and that was better nor stirring up their gall wi' being overbusy. Mrs Poyser used to say — you know she would have her word about everything — she said, Mr Irwine was like a good meal o' victual, you were the better for him without thinking on it, and Mr Ryde was like a dose o' physic, he gripped you and worreted you, and after all he left you much the same.'

'But didn't Mr Ryde preach a great deal more about that spiritual part of religion than you talk of, Adam? Couldn't you get more out of his sermons than out of Mr Irwine's?'

'Eh, I knowna. He preached a deal about doctrines. But I've seen pretty clear ever since I was a young un,

as religion's something else besides doctrines and notions. I look at it as if the doctrines was like finding names for your feelings, so as you can talk of 'em when you've never known 'em, just as a man may talk o' tools when he knows their names, though he's never so much as seen 'em, still less handled 'em. I've heard a deal o' doctrine i' my time, for I used to go after the Dissenting preachers along wi' Seth, when I was a lad o' seventeen, and got puzzling myself a deal about th' Arminians and the Calvinists.[8] The Wesleyans, you know, are strong Arminians; and Seth, who could never abide anything harsh, and was always for hoping the best, held fast by the Wesleyans from the very first; but I thought I could pick a hole or two in their notions, and I got disputing wi' one o' the class leaders down at Treddles'on, and harassed him so, first o' this side and then o' that, till at last he said, "Young man, it's the devil making use o' your pride and conceit as a weapon to war against the simplicity o' the truth." I couldn't help laughing then, but as I was going home, I thought the man wasn't far wrong. I began to see as all this weighing and sifting what this text means and that text means, and whether folks are saved all by God's grace, or whether there goes an ounce o' their own will to 't, was no part o' real religion at all. You may talk o' these things for hours on end, and you'll only be all the more coxy and conceited for't. So I took to going nowhere but to church, and hearing nobody but Mr Irwine, for he said nothing but what was good, and what you'd be the wiser for remembering. And I found it better for my soul to be humble before the mysteries o' God's dealings, and not be making a clatter about what I could never understand. And they're poor foolish questions after all; for what have we got either inside or outside of us but what comes from God? If we've got a resolution to do right, He gave it us, I reckon, first or last; but I see plain enough we shall never do it without a resolution, and that's enough for me.'

Adam, you perceive, was a warm admirer, perhaps a partial judge, of Mr Irwine, as, happily, some of us still are of the people we have known familiarly. Doubtless it will be despised as a weakness by that lofty order of minds who pant after the ideal, and are oppressed by a general sense that their emotions are of too exquisite a character to find fit objects among their everyday fellow-men. I have often been favoured with the confidence of these select natures, and find them concur in the experience that great men are over-estimated and small men are insupportable; that if you would love a woman without ever looking back on your love as a folly, she must die while you are courting her; and if you would maintain the slightest belief in human heroism, you must never make a pilgrimage to see the hero. I confess I have often meanly shrunk from confessing to these accomplished and acute gentlemen what my own experience has been. I am afraid I have often smiled with hypocritical assent, and gratified them with an epigram on the fleeting nature of our illusions, which any one moderately acquainted with French literature[9] can command at a moment's notice. Human converse, I think some wise man has remarked, is not rigidly sincere. But I herewith discharge my conscience, and declare, that I have had quite enthusiastic movements of admiration towards old gentlemen who spoke the worst English, who were occasionally fretful in their temper, and who had never moved in a higher sphere of influence than that of parish overseer; and that the way in which I have come to the conclusion that human nature is lovable — the way I have learnt something of its deep pathos, its sublime mysteries — has been by living a great deal among people more or less commonplace and vulgar, of whom you would perhaps hear nothing very surprising if you were to inquire about them in the neighbourhoods where they dwelt. Ten to one most of the small shopkeepers in their vicinity saw nothing at all in them. For I have observed this remarkable coincidence, that the select natures who pant after the ideal, and find nothing in pantaloons or petticoats great enough to command their reverence and love, are curiously in unison with the narrowest and pettiest. For example, I have often heard Mr Gedge, the landlord of the Royal Oak, who used to turn a bloodshot eye on his neighbours in the village of Shepperton, sum up his opinion of the people in his own parish — and they were all the people he knew — in these emphatic words: 'Ay, sir, I've said it often, and I'll say it again, they're a poor lot i' this parish — a poor lot, sir, big and little.' I think he had a dim idea that if he could migrate to a distant parish, he might find neighbours worthy of him; and indeed he did subsequently transfer himself to the Saracen's Head, which was doing a thriving business in the back street of a neighbouring market-town. But, oddly enough, he has found the people up that back street of precisely the same stamp as the inhabitants of Shepperton — 'a poor lot, sir, big and little, and them as comes for a go o' gin are no better than them as comes for a pint o' twopenny — a poor lot'.

CHAPTER XVIII

Church

‘Hetty, Hetty, don’t you know church begins at two, and it’s gone half after one a’ready? Have you got nothing better to think on this good Sunday, as poor old Thias Bede’s to be put into the ground, and him drownded i’ th’ dead o’ the night, as it’s enough to make one’s back run cold, but you must be ‘dizening[1] yourself as if there was a wedding istid of a funeral?’

‘Well, aunt,’ said Hetty, ‘I can’t be ready so soon as everybody else, when I’ve got Totty’s things to put on. And I’d ever such work to make her stand still.’

Hetty was coming down-stairs, and Mrs Poyser, in her plain bonnet and shawl, was standing below. If ever a girl looked as if she had been made of roses, that girl was Hetty in her Sunday hat and frock. For her hat was trimmed with pink, and her frock had pink spots, sprinkled on a white ground. There was nothing but pink and white about her, except in her dark hair and eyes and her little buckled shoes. Mrs Poyser was provoked at herself, for she could hardly keep from smiling, as any mortal is inclined to do at the sight of pretty round things. So she turned without speaking, and joined the group outside the house door, followed by Hetty, whose heart was fluttering so at the thought of some one she expected to see at church, that she hardly felt the ground she trod on.

And now the little procession set off. Mr Poyser was in his Sunday suit of drab,[2] with a red-and-green waistcoat, and a green watch-ribbon having a large cornelian seal[3] attached, pendant like a plumb-line from that promontory where his watch-pocket was situated; a silk handkerchief of a yellow tone round his neck; and excellent grey ribbed stockings, knitted by Mrs Poyser’s own hand, setting off the proportions of his leg. Mr Poyser had no reason to be ashamed of his leg, and suspected that the growing abuse of top-boots and other fashions tending to disguise the nether limbs, had their origin in a pitiable degeneracy of the human calf. Still less had he reason to be ashamed of his round jolly face, which was good-humour itself as he said, ‘Come, Hetty — come, little uns!’ and, giving his arm to his wife, led the way through the causeway gate into the yard.

The ‘little uns’ addressed were Marty and Tommy, boys of nine and seven, in little fustian tailed coats and knee-breeches, relieved by rosy cheeks and black eyes; looking as much like their father as a very small elephant is like a very large one. Hetty walked between them, and behind came patient Molly, whose task it was to carry Totty through the yard, and over all the wet places on the road; for Totty, having speedily recovered from her threatened fever, had insisted on going to church today, and especially on wearing her red-and-black necklace outside her tippet.[4] And there were many wet places for her to be carried over this afternoon, for there had been heavy showers in the morning, though now the clouds had rolled off and lay in towering silvery masses on the horizon.

You might have known it was Sunday if you had only waked up in the farmyard. The cocks and hens seemed to know it, and made only crooning subdued noises; the very bull-dog looked less savage, as if he would have been satisfied with a smaller bite than usual. The sunshine seemed to call all things to rest and not to labour; it was asleep itself on the moss-grown cowshed; on the group of white ducks nestling together with their bills tucked under their wings; on the old black sow stretched languidly on the straw, while her largest young one found an excellent spring-bed on his mother’s fat ribs; on Alick, the shepherd, in his new smock-frock, taking an uneasy siesta, half-sitting half-standing on the granary steps. Alick was of opinion that church, like other luxuries, was not to be indulged in often by a foreman who had the weather and the ewes on his mind. ‘Church! nay — I’n gotten summat else to think on,’ was an answer which he often uttered in a tone of bitter significance that silenced further question. I feel sure Alick meant no irreverence; indeed, I know that his mind was not of a speculative negative cast, and he would on no account have missed going to church on Christmas Day, Easter Sunday, and ‘Whissuntide’.[5] But he had a general impression that public worship and religious ceremonies, like other non-productive employments, were intended for people who had leisure.

‘There’s father a-standing at the yard-gate,’ said Martin Poyser. ‘I reckon he wants to watch us down the field. It’s wonderful what sight he has, and him turned seventy-five.’

‘Ah, I often think it’s wi’ th’ old folks as it is wi’ the babbies,’ said Mrs Poyser; ‘they’re satisfied wi’

looking, no matter what they're looking at. It's God A'mighty's way o' quietening 'em, I reckon, afore they go to sleep.'

Old Martin opened the gate as he saw the family procession approaching, and held it wide open, leaning on his stick – pleased to do this bit of work; for, like all old men whose life has been spent in labour, he liked to feel that he was still useful — that there was a better crop of onions in the garden because he was by at the sowing — and that the cows would be milked the better if he stayed at home on a Sunday afternoon to look on. He always went to church on Sacrament Sundays, but not very regularly at other times; on wet Sundays, or whenever he had a touch of rheumatism, he used to read the three first chapters of Genesis instead.

'They'll ha' putten Thias Bede i' the ground afore ye get to the churchyard,' he said, as his son came up. 'It 'ud ha' been better luck if they'd ha' buried him i' the forenoon when the rain was fallin'; there's no likelihoods of a drop now; an' the moon lies like a boat there, dost see? That's a sure sign o' fair weather — there's a many as is false, but that's sure.'

'Ay, ay,' said the son, 'I'm in hopes it'll hold up now.'

'Mind what the parson says, mind what the parson says, my lads,' said Grandfather to the black-eyed youngsters in knee-breeches, conscious of a marble or two in their pockets, which they looked forward to handling a little, secretly, during the sermon.

'Dood-bye, dandad,' said Totty. 'Me doin to church. Me dot my netlace on. Dive me a peppermint.'

Grandad, shaking with laughter at this 'deep little wench', slowly transferred his stick to his left hand, which held the gate open, and slowly thrust his finger into the waistcoat-pocket on which Totty had fixed her eyes with a confident look of expectation.

And when they were all gone, the old man leaned on the gate again, watching them across the lane along the Home Close, and through the far gate, till they disappeared behind a bend in the hedge. For the hedgerows in those days shut out one's view, even on the better-managed farms; and this afternoon, the dog-roses were tossing out their pink wreaths, the nightshade was in its yellow and purple glory, the pale honeysuckle grew out of reach, peeping high up out of a holly bush, and over all an ash or a sycamore every now and then threw its shadow across the path.

There were acquaintances at other gates who had to move aside and let them pass: at the gate of the Home Close there was half the dairy of cows standing one behind the other, extremely slow to understand that their large bodies might be in the way; at the far gate there was the mare holding her head over the bars, and beside her the liver-coloured foal with its head towards its mother's flank, apparently still much embarrassed by its own straddling existence. The way lay entirely through Mr Poyser's own fields till they reached the main road leading to the village, and he turned a keen eye on the stock and the crops as they went along, while Mrs Poyser was ready to supply a running commentary on them all. The woman who manages a dairy has a large share in making the rent, so she may well be allowed to have her opinion on stock and their 'keep' — an exercise which strengthens her understanding so much that she finds herself able to give her husband advice on most other subjects.

'There's that short-horned Sally,' she said, as they entered the Home Close, and she caught sight of the meek beast that lay chewing the cud, and looking at her with a sleepy eye. 'I begin to hate the sight o' the cow; and I say now what I said three weeks ago, the sooner we get rid of her the better, for there's that little yallow cow as doesn't give half the milk, and yet I've twice as much butter from her.'

'Why, Thee't not like the women in general,' said Mr Poyser; 'they like the short-horns, as give such a lot o' milk. There's Chowne's wife wants him to buy no other sort.'

'What's it sinnify what Chowne's wife likes? — a poor soft thing, wi' no more head-piece nor a sparrow. She'd take a big cullender to strain her lard wi', and then wonder as the scratchins run through. I've seen enough of her to know as I'll niver take a servant from her house again — all hugger-mugger — and you'd niver know, when you went in, whether it was Monday or Friday, the wash draggin' on to th' end o' the week; and as for her cheese, I know well enough it rose like a loaf in a tin last year. And then she talks o' the weather bein' i' fault, as there's folks 'ud stand on their heads and then say the fault was i' their boots.'

'Well, Chowne's been wanting to buy Sally, so we can get rid of her if thee lik'st,' said Mr Poyser, secretly proud of his wife's superior power of putting two and two together; indeed, on recent market-days he had more than once boasted of her discernment in this very matter of short-horns.

'Ay, them as choose a soft for a wife may's well buy up the short-horns, for if you get your head stuck in a bog your legs may's well go after it. Eh! talk o' legs, there's legs for you,' Mrs Poyser continued, as Totty, who had been set down now the road was dry, toddled on in front of her father and mother. 'There's shapes! An' she's got such a long foot, she'll be her father's own child.'

'Ay, she'll be welly such a one as Hetty i' ten years' time, On'y she's got *thy* coloured eyes. I niver

remember a blue eye i' my family; my mother had eyes as black as sloes, just like Hetty's.'

'The child 'ull be none the worse for having summat as isn't like Hetty. An' I'm none for having her so over pretty. Though, for the matter o' that, there's people wi' light hair an' blue eyes as pretty as them wi' black. If Dinah had got a bit o' colour in her cheeks, an' didn't stick that Methodist cap on her head, enough to frighten the cows, folks 'ud think her as pretty as Hetty.'

'Nay, nay,' said Mr Poyser, with rather a contemptuous emphasis, 'thee dostna know the pints of a woman. The men 'ud niver run after Dinah as they would after Hetty.'

'What care I what the men 'ud run after? It's well seen what choice the most of 'em know how to make, by the poor draggle-tails o' wives you see, like bits o' gauze ribbin, good for nothing when the colour's gone.'

'Well, well, thee canstna say but what I knowed how to make a choice when I married thee,' said Mr Poyser, who usually settled little conjugal disputes by a compliment of this sort; 'and thee wast twice as buxom as Dinah ten year ago.'

'I niver said as a woman had need to be ugly to make a good missis of a house. There's Chowne's wife ugly enough to turn the milk an' save the rennet,[6] but she'll niver save nothing any other way. But as for Dinah, poor child, she's niver likely to be buxom as long as she'll make her dinner o' cake and water, for the sake o' giving to them as want. She provoked me past bearing sometimes; and, as I told her, she went clean again' the Scriptur', for that says, "Love your neighbour as yourself";[7] "but," I said, "if you loved your neighbour no better nor you do yourself, Dinah, it's little enough you'd do for him. You'd be thinking he might do well enough on a half-empty stomach." Eh, I wonder where she is this blessed Sunday! — sitting by that sick woman, I daresay, as she'd set her heart on going to all of a sudden.'

'Ah, it was a pity she should take such megrims[8] into her head, when she might ha' stayed wi' us all summer, and eaten twice as much as she wanted, and it 'ud niver ha' been missed. She made no odds in th' house at all, for she sat as still at her sewing as a bird on the nest, and was uncommon nimble at running to fetch anything. If Hetty gets married, theed'st like to ha' Dinah wi' thee constant.'

'It's no use thinking o' that,' said Mrs Poyser. 'You might as well beckon to the flying swallow, as ask Dinah to come an' live here comfortable, like other folks. If anything could turn her, *I* should ha' turned her, for I've talked to her for a hour on end, and scolded her too; for she's my own sister's child, and it behoves me to do what I can for her. But eh, poor thing, as soon as she'd said us "good-bye", an' got into the cart, an' looked back at me with her pale face, as is welly like her aunt Judith come back from heaven, I begun to be frightened to think o' the set-downs I had given her; for it comes over you sometimes as if she'd a way o' knowing the rights o' things more nor other folks have. But I'll niver give in as that's 'cause she's a Methodist, no more nor a white calf's white 'cause it eats out o' the same bucket wi' a black un.'

'Nay,' said Mr Poyser, with as near an approach to a snarl as his good-nature would allow; 'I'n no opinion o' the Methodists. It's On'y tradesfolks as turn Methodists; you niver knew a farmer bitten wi' them maggots. There's maybe a workman now an' then, as isn't over clever at's work, takes to preachin' an' that, like Seth Bede. But you see Adam, as has got one o' the best head-pieces hereabout, knows better; he's a good Churchman, else I'd never encourage him for a sweetheart for Hetty.'

'Why, goodness me,' said Mrs Poyser, who had looked back while her husband was speaking, 'look where Molly is with them lads. They're the field's length behind us. How *could* you let 'em do so, Hetty? Anybody might as well set a pictur to watch the children as you. Run back, and tell 'em to come on.'

Mr and Mrs Poyser were now at the end of the second field, so they set Totty on the top of one of the large stones forming the true Loamshire stile, and awaited the loiterers; Totty observing with complacency, 'Dey naughty, naughty boys — me dood.'

The fact was that this Sunday walk through the fields was fraught with great excitement to Marty and Tommy, who saw a perpetual drama going on in the hedgerows, and could no more refrain from stopping and peeping than if they had been a couple of spaniels or terriers. Marty was quite sure he saw a yellowhammer on the boughs of the great ash, and while he was peeping, he missed the sight of a white-throated stoat, which had run across the path and was described with much fervour by the junior Tommy. Then there was a little greenfinch, just fledged, fluttering along the ground, and it seemed quite possible to catch it, till it managed to flutter under the blackberry bush. Hetty could not be got to give any heed to these things, so Molly was called on for her ready sympathy, and peeped with open mouth wherever she was told, and said 'Lawks!' whenever she was expected to wonder.

Molly hastened on with some alarm when Hetty had come back and called to them that her aunt was angry; but Marty ran on first, shouting, 'We've found the speckled turkey's nest, mother!' with the instinctive confidence that people who bring good news are never in fault.

'Ah,' said Mrs Poyser, really forgetting all discipline in this pleasant surprise, 'that's a good lad; why,

where is it?'

'Down in ever such a hole, under the hedge. I saw it first, looking after the greenfinch, and she sat on the nest.'

'You didn't frighten her, I hope,' said the mother, 'else she'll forsake it.'

'No, I went away as still as still, and whispered to Molly – didn't I, Molly?'

'Well, well, now come on,' said Mrs Poyser, 'and walk before father and mother, and take your little sister by the hand. We must go straight on now. Good boys don't look after the birds of a Sunday.'

'But, mother,' said Marty, 'you said you'd give half-a-crown to find the speckled turkey's nest. Mayn't I have the half-crown put into my money-box?'

'We'll see about that, my lad, if you walk along now like a good boy.'

The father and mother exchanged a significant glance of amusement at their eldest-born's acuteness; but on Tommy's round face there was a cloud.

'Mother,' he said, half crying, 'Marty's got ever so much more money in his box nor I've got in mine.'

'Munny, *me* want half-a-toun in *my* bots,' said Totty.

'Hush, hush, hush,' said Mrs Poyser, 'did ever anybody hear such naughty children? Nobody shall ever see their moneyboxes any more, if they don't make haste and go on to church.'

This dreadful threat had the desired effect, and through the two remaining fields the three pair of small legs trotted on without any serious interruption, notwithstanding a small pond full of tadpoles, alias 'bullhead', which the lads looked at wistfully.

The damp hay that must be scattered and turned afresh tomorrow was not a cheering sight to Mr Poyser, who during hay and corn harvest had often some mental struggles as to the benefits of a day of rest; but no temptation would have induced him to carry on any field-work, however early in the morning, on a Sunday; for had not Michael Holdsworth had a pair of oxen 'sweltered'[9] while he was ploughing on Good Friday? That was a demonstration that work on sacred days was a wicked thing; and with wickedness of any sort Martin Poyser was quite clear that he would have nothing to do, since money got by such means would never prosper.

'It a'most makes your fingers itch to be at the hay now the sun shines so,' he observed, as they passed through the 'Big Meadow'. 'But it's poor foolishness to think o' saving by going against your conscience. There's that Jim Wakefield, as they used to call "Gentleman Wakefield", used to do the same of a Sunday as o' week-days, and took no heed to right or wrong, as if there was nayther God nor devil. An' what's he come to? Why, I saw him myself last market-day a-carrying a basket wi' oranges in't.'

'Ah, to be sure,' said Mrs Poyser, emphatically, 'you make but a poor trap to catch luck if you go and bait it wi' wickedness. The money as is got so's like to burn holes i' your pocket. I'd niver wish us to leave our lads a sixpence but what was got i' the rightful way. And as for the weather, there's One above makes it, and we must put up wi't: it's nothing of a plague to what the wenches are.'

Notwithstanding the interruption in their walk, the excellent habit which Mrs Poyser's clock had of taking time by the forelock, had secured their arrival at the village while it was still a quarter to two, though almost every one who meant to go to church was already within the churchyard gates. Those who stayed at home were chiefly mothers, like Timothy's Bess, who stood at her own door nursing her baby, and feeling as women feel in that position — that nothing else can be expected of them.

It was not entirely to see Thias Bede's funeral that the people were standing about the churchyard so long before service began; that was their common practice. The women, indeed, usually entered the church at once, and the farmers' wives talked in an under-tone to each other, over the tall pews, about their illnesses and the total failure of doctor's stuff, recommending dandelion-tea, and other home-made specifics, as far preferable — about the servants, and their growing exorbitance as to wages, whereas the quality of their services declined from year to year, and there was no girl nowadays to be trusted any further than you could see her — about the bad price Mr Dingall, the Treddleston grocer, was giving for butter, and the reasonable doubts that might be held as to his solvency, notwithstanding that Mrs Dingall was a sensible woman, and they were all sorry for *her,* for she had very good kin. Meantime the men lingered outside, and hardly any of them except the singers, who had a humming and fragmentary rehearsal to go through, entered the church until Mr Irwine was in the desk. They saw no reason for that premature entrance, — what could they do in church, if they were there before service began? — and they did not conceive that any power in the universe could take it ill of them if they stayed out and talked a little about 'bus'ness'.

Chad Cranage looks like quite a new acquaintance to-day, for he has got his clean Sunday face, which always makes his little granddaughter cry at him as a stranger. But an experienced eye would have fixed on him at once as the village blacksmith, after seeing the humble deference with which the big saucy fellow took off his hat and stroked his hair to the farmers; for Chad was accustomed to say that a working man

must hold a candle to — a personage understood to be as black as he was himself on week-days; by which evil-sounding rule of conduct he meant what was, after all, rather virtuous than otherwise, namely, that men who had horses to be shod must be treated with respect. Chad and the rougher sort of workmen kept aloof from the grave under the white thorn, where the burial was going forward; but Sandy Jim, and several of the farm-labourers, made a group round it, and stood with their hats off, as fellow-mourners with the mother and sons. Others held a midway position, sometimes watching the group at the grave, sometimes listening to the conversation of the farmers, who stood in a knot near the church door, and were now joined by Martin Poyser, while his family passed into the church. On the outside of this knot stood Mr Casson, the landlord of the Donnithorne Arms, in his most striking attitude — that is to say, with the forefinger of his right hand thrust between the buttons of his waistcoat, his left hand in his breeches-pocket, and his head very much on one side; looking, on the whole, like an actor who has only a monosyllabic part intrusted to him, but feels sure that the audience discern his fitness for the leading business; curiously in contrast with old Jonathan Bürge, who held his hands behind him, and leaned forward coughing asthmatically, with an inward scorn of all knowingness that could not be turned into cash. The talk was in rather a lower tone than usual to-day, hushed a little by the sound of Mr Irwine's voice reading the final prayers of the burial-service. They had all had their word of pity for poor Thias, but now they had got upon the nearer subject of their own grievances against Satchell, the Squire's bailiff, who played the part of steward so far as it was not performed by old Mr Donnithorne himself, for that gentleman had the meanness to receive his own rents and make bargains about his own timber. This subject of conversation was an additional reason for not being loud, since Satchell himself might presently be walking up the paved road to the church door. And soon they became suddenly silent; for Mr Irwine's voice had ceased, and the group round the white thorn was dispersing itself towards the church.

They all moved aside, and stood with their hats off, while Mr Irwine passed. Adam and Seth were coming next with their mother between them; for Joshua Rann officiated as head sexton as well as clerk, and was not yet ready to follow the rector into the vestry. But there was a pause before the three mourners came on: Lisbeth had turned round to look again towards the grave! Ah! there was nothing now but the brown earth under the white thorn. Yet she cried less to-day than she had done any day since her husband's death: along with all her grief there was mixed an unusual sense of her own importance in having a 'burial', and in Mr Irwine's reading a special service for her husband; and besides, she knew the funeral psalm was going to be sung for him. She felt this counter-excitement to her sorrow still more strongly as she walked with her sons towards the church door, and saw the friendly sympathetic nods of their fellow-parishioners.

The mother and sons passed into the church, and one by one the loiterers followed, though some still lingered without; the sight of Mr Donnithorne's carriage, which was winding slowly up the hill, perhaps helping to make them feel that there was no need for haste.

But presently the sound of the bassoon and the key-bugles[10] burst forth; the evening hymn, which always opened the service, had begun, and every one must now enter and take his place.

I cannot say that the interior of Hayslope Church was remarkable for anything except for the grey age of its oaken pews — great square pews mostly, ranged on each side of a narrow aisle. It was free, indeed, from the modern blemish of galleries. The choir had two narrow pews to themselves in the middle of the right-hand row, so that it was a short process for Joshua Rann to take his place among them as principal bass, and return to his desk after the singing was over. The pulpit and desk, grey and old as the pews, stood on one side of the arch leading into the chancel, which also had its grey square pews for Mr Donnithorne's family and servants. Yet I assure you these grey pews, with the buff-washed walls, gave a very pleasing tone to this shabby interior, and agreed extremely well with the ruddy faces and bright waistcoats. And there were liberal touches of crimson toward the chancel, for the pulpit and Mr Donnithorne's own pew had handsome crimson cloth cushions; and, to close the vista, there was a crimson altar-cloth, embroidered with golden rays by Miss Lydia's own hand.

But even without the crimson cloth, the effect must have been warm and cheering when Mr Irwine was in the desk, looking benignly round on that simple congregation — on the hardy old men, with bent knees and shoulders, perhaps, but with vigour left for much hedge-clipping and thatching; on the tall stalwart frames and roughly-cut bronzed faces of the stone-cutters and carpenters; on the half-dozen well-to-do farmers, with their apple-cheeked families; and on the clean old women, mostly farm-labourers' wives, with their bit of snow-white cap-border under their black bonnets, and with their withered arms, bare from the elbow, folded passively over their chests. For none of the old people held books — why should they? not one of them could read. But they knew a few 'good words' by heart, and their withered lips now and then moved silently, following the service without any very clear comprehension indeed, but with a simple faith in its efficacy to ward off harm and bring blessing. And now all faces were visible, for all were standing up — the little children on the seats, peeping over the edge of the grey pews, while good Bishop Ken's evening

hymn[11] was being sung to one of those lively psalm-tunes which died out with the last generation of rectors and choral parish-clerks. Melodies die out, like the pipe of Pan,[12] with the ears that love them and listen for them. Adam was not in his usual place among the singers to-day, for he sat with his mother and Seth, and he noticed with surprise that Bartle Massey was absent too: all the more agreeable for Mr Joshua Rann, who gave out his bass notes with unusual complacency, and threw an extra ray of severity into the glances he sent over his spectacles at the recusant Will Maskery.

I beseech you to imagine Mr Irwine looking round on this scene, in his ample white surplice, that became him so well, with his powdered hair thrown back, his rich brown complexion, and his finely-cut nostril and upper lip; for there was a certain virtue in that benignant yet keen countenance, as there is in all human faces from which a generous soul beams out. And over all streamed the delicious June sunshine through the old windows, with their desultory patches of yellow, red, and blue, that threw pleasant touches of colour on the opposite wall.

I think, as Mr Irwine looked round to-day, his eyes rested an instant longer than usual on the square pew occupied by Martin Poyser and his family. And there was another pair of dark eyes that found it impossible not to wander thither, and rest on that round pink-and-white figure. But Hetty was at that moment quite careless of any glances — she was absorbed in the thought that Arthur Donnithorne would soon be coming into church, for the carriage must surely be at the church gate by this time. She had never seen him since she parted with him in the wood on Thursday evening, and oh! how long the time had seemed! Things had gone on just the same as ever since that evening; the wonders that had happened then had brought no changes after them; they were already like a dream. When she heard the church door swinging, her heart beat so, she dared not look up. She felt that her aunt was curtsying; she curtsied herself. That must be old Mr Donnithorne — he always came first, the wrinkled small old man, peering round with short-sighted glances at the bowing and curtsying congregation; then she knew Miss Lydia was passing, and though Hetty liked so much to look at her fashionable little coal-scuttle bonnet, with the wreath of small roses round it, she didn't mind it to-day. But there were no more curtsies — no, he was not come; she felt sure there was nothing else passing the pew door but the housekeeper's black bonnet, and the lady's-maid's beautiful straw that had once been Miss Lydia's, and then the powdered heads of the butler and footman. No, he was not there; yet she would look now — she might be mistaken — for, after all, she had not looked. So she lifted up her eyelids and glanced timidly at the cushioned pew in the chancel: — there was no one but old Mr Donnithorne rubbing his spectacles with his white handkerchief, and Miss Lydia opening the large gilt-edged prayer-book. The chill disappointment was too hard to bear: she felt herself turning pale, her lips trembling; she was ready to cry. Oh, what *should* she do? Everybody would know the reason; they would know she was crying because Arthur was not there. And Mr Craig, with the wonderful hot-house plant in his button-hole, was staring at her, she knew. It was dreadfully long before the General Confession[13] began, so that she could kneel down. Two great drops *would* fall then, but no one saw them except good-natured Molly, for her aunt and uncle knelt with their backs towards her. Molly, unable to imagine any cause for tears in church except faintness, of which she had a vague traditional knowledge, drew out of her pocket a queer little flat blue smelling-bottle,[14] and after much labour in pulling the cork out, thrust the narrow neck against Hetty's nostrils. 'It donna smell,' she whispered, thinking this was a great advantage which old salts had over fresh ones: they did you good without biting your nose. Hetty pushed it away peevishly; but this little flash of temper did what the salts could not have done — it roused her to wipe away the traces of her tears, and try with all her might not to shed any more. Hetty had a certain strength in her vain little nature: she would have borne anything rather than be laughed at, or pointed at with any other feeling than admiration; she would have pressed her own nails into her tender flesh rather than people should know a secret she did not want them to know.

What fluctuations there were in her busy thoughts and feelings, while Mr Irwine was pronouncing the solemn 'Absolution' in her deaf ears, and through all the tones of petition that followed! Anger lay very close to disappointment, and soon won the victory over the conjectures her small ingenuity could devise to account for Arthur's absence on the supposition that he really wanted to come, really wanted to see her again. And by the time she rose from her knees mechanically, because all the rest were rising, the colour had returned to her cheeks even with a heightened glow, for she was framing little indignant speeches to herself, saying she hated Arthur for giving her this pain — she would like him to suffer too. Yet while this selfish tumult was going on in her soul, her eyes were bent down on her prayer-book, and the eyelids with their dark fringe looked as lovely as ever. Adam Bede thought so, as he glanced at her for a moment on rising from his knees.

But Adam's thoughts of Hetty did not deafen him to the service; they rather blended with all the other deep feelings for which the church service was a channel to him this afternoon, as a certain consciousness of our entire past and our imagined future blends itself with all our moments of keen sensibility. And to

Adam the church service was the best channel he could have found for his mingled regret, yearning, and resignation; its interchange of beseeching cries for help, with outbursts of faith and praise — its recurrent responses and the familiar rhythm of its collects, seemed to speak for him as no other form of worship could have done; as, to those early Christians who had worshipped from their childhood upward in catacombs,[15] the torch-light and shadows must have seemed nearer the Divine presence than the heathenish daylight of the street. The secret of our emotions never lies in the bare object, but in its subtle relations to our own past: no wonder the secret escapes the unsympathizing observer, who might as well put on his spectacles to discern odours.

But there was one reason why even a chance comer would have found the service in Hayslope Church more impressive than in most other village nooks in the kingdom — a reason, of which I am sure you have not the slightest suspicion. It was the reading of our friend Joshua Rann. Where that good shoemaker got his notion of reading from, remained a mystery even to his most intimate acquaintances. I believe, after all, he got it chiefly from Nature, who had poured some of her music into this honest conceited soul, as she had been known to do into other narrow souls before his. She had given him, at least, a fine bass voice and a musical ear; but I cannot positively say whether these alone had sufficed to inspire him with the rich chant in which he delivered the responses. The way he rolled from a rich deep forte into a melancholy cadence, subsiding, at the end of the last word, into a sort of faint resonance, like the lingering vibrations of a fine violoncello, I can compare to nothing for its strong calm melancholy but the rush and cadence of the wind among the autumn boughs. This may seem a strange mode of speaking about the reading of a parish-clerk — a man in rusty spectacles, with stubbly hair, a large occiput, and a prominent crown.[16] But that is Nature's way: she will allow a gentleman of splendid physiognomy and poetic aspirations to sing woefully out of tune, and not give him the slightest hint of it; and takes care that some narrow-browed fellow, trolling a ballad in the corner of a pot-house, shall be as true to his intervals as a bird.

Joshua himself was less proud of his reading than of his singing, and it was always with a sense of heightened importance that he passed from the desk to the choir. Still more to-day: it was a special occasion; for an old man, familiar to all the parish, had died a sad death — not in his bed, a circumstance the most painful to the mind of the peasant — and now the funeral psalm was to be sung in memory of his sudden departure. Moreover, Bartle Massey was not at church, and Joshua's importance in the choir suffered no eclipse. It was a solemn minor strain they sang. The old psalm-tunes have many a wail among them, and the words –

> 'Thou sweep'st us off as with a flood;
> We vanish hence like dreams'[17]

– seemed to have a closer application than usual, in the death of poor Thias. The mother and sons listened, each with peculiar feelings. Lisbeth had a vague belief that the psalm was doing her husband good; it was part of that decent burial which she would have thought it a greater wrong to withhold from him than to have caused him many unhappy days while he was living. The more there was said about her husband, the more there was done for him, surely the safer he would be. It was poor Lisbeth's blind way of feeling that human love and pity are a ground of faith in some other love. Seth, who was easily touched, shed tears, and tried to recall, as he had done continually since his father's death, all that he had heard of the possibility that a single moment of consciousness at the last might be a moment of pardon and reconcilement; for was it not written in the very psalm they were singing, that the divine dealings were not measured and circumscribed by time? Adam had never been unable to join in a psalm before. He had known plenty of trouble and vexation since he had been a lad; but this was the first sorrow that had hemmed in his voice, and strangely enough it was sorrow because the chief source of his past trouble and vexation was for ever gone out of his reach. He had not been able to press his father's hand before their parting, and say, 'Father, you know it was all right between us; I never forgot what I owed you when I was a lad; you forgive me if I have been too hot and hasty now and then!' Adam thought but little to-day of the hard work and the earnings he had spent on his father: his thoughts ran constantly on what the old man's feelings had been in moments of humilation, when he had held down his head before the rebukes of his son. When our indignation is borne in submissive silence, we are apt to feel twinges of doubt afterwards as to our own generosity, if not justice; how much more when the object of our anger has gone into everlasting silence, and we have seen his face for the last time in the meekness of death!

'Ah! I was always too hard,' Adam said to himself. 'It's a sore fault in me as I'm so hot and out o' patience with people when they do wrong, and my heart gets shut up against 'em, so as I can't bring myself to forgive 'em. I see clear enough there's more pride nor love in my soul, for I could sooner make a thousand strokes with th' hammer for my father than bring myself to say a kind word to him. And there went plenty o' pride and temper to the strokes, as the devil *will* be having his finger in what we call our duties as well as

our sins. Mayhap the best thing I ever did in my life was only doing what was easiest for myself. It's allays been easier for me to work nor to sit still, but the real tough job for me 'ud be to master my own will and temper, and go right against my own pride. It seems to me now, if I was to find father at home to-night, I should behave different; but there's no knowing — perhaps nothing 'ud be a lesson to us if it didn't come too late. It's well we should feel as life's a reckoning we can't make twice over; there's no real making amends in this world, any more nor you can mend a wrong subtraction by doing your addition right.'

This was the key-note to which Adam's thoughts had perpetually returned since his father's death, and the solemn wail of the funeral psalm was only an influence that brought back the old thoughts with stronger emphasis. So was the sermon, which Mr Irwine had chosen with reference to Thias's funeral. It spoke briefly and simply of the words, 'In the midst of life we are in death'[18] — how the present moment is all we can call our own for works of mercy, of righteous dealing, and of family tenderness. All very old truths — but what we thought the oldest truth becomes the most startling to us in the week when we have looked on the dead face of one who has made a part of our own lives. For when men want to impress us with the effect of a new and wonderfully vivid light, do they not let it fall on the most familiar objects, that we may measure its intensity by remembering the former dimness?

Then came the moment of the final blessing, when the forever sublime words, 'The peace of God, which passeth all understanding', seemed to blend with the calm afternoon sunshine that fell on the bowed heads of the congregation; and then the quiet rising, the mothers tying on the bonnets of the little maidens who had slept through the sermon, the fathers collecting the prayer-books, until all streamed out through the old archway into the green churchyard, and began their neighbourly talk, their simple civilities, and their invitations to tea; for on a Sunday every one was ready to receive a guest — it was the day when all must be in their best clothes and their best humour.

Mr and Mrs Poyser paused a minute at the church gate: they were waiting for Adam to come up, not being contented to go away without saying a kind word to the widow and her sons.

'Well, Mrs Bede,' said Mrs Poyser, as they walked on together, 'you must keep up your heart; husbands and wives must be content when they've lived to rear their children and see one another's hair grey.'

'Ay, ay,' said Mr Poyser; 'they wonna have long to wait for one another then, anyhow. And ye've got two o' the strapping'st sons i' th' country; and well you may, for I remember poor Thias as fine a broad-shouldered fellow as need to be; and as for you, Mrs Bede, why you're straighter i' the back nor half the young women now.'

'Eh,' said Lisbeth, 'it's poor luck for the platter to wear well when it's broke i' two. The sooner I'm laid under the thorn the better. I'm no good to nobody now.'

Adam never took notice of his mother's little unjust plaints; but Seth said, 'Nay, mother, thee mustna say so. Thy sons 'ull never get another mother.'

'That's true, lad, that's true,' said Mr Poyser; 'and it's wrong on us to give way to grief, Mrs Bede; for it's like the children cryin' when the fathers and mothers take things from 'em. There's One above knows better nor us.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Poyser, 'an' it's poor work allays settin' the dead above the livin'. We shall all on us be dead some time, I reckon — it 'ud be better if folks 'ud make much on us beforehand, istid o' beginnin' when we're gone. It's but little good you'll do a-watering the last year's crop.'

'Well, Adam,' said Mr Poyser, feeling that his wife's words were, as usual, rather incisive than soothing, and that it would be well to change the subject, 'you'll come and see us again now, I hope. I hanna had a talk with you this long while, and the missis here wants you to see what can be done with her best spinning-wheel, for it's got broke, and it'll be a nice job to mend it — there'll want a bit o' turning. You'll come as soon as you can now, will you?'

Mr Poyser paused and looked round while he was speaking, as if to see where Hetty was; for the children were running on before. Hetty was not without a companion, and she had, besides, more pink and white about her than ever; for she held in her hand the wonderful pink-and-white hot-house plant, with a very long name — a Scotch name, she supposed,[19] since people said Mr Craig the gardener was Scotch. Adam took the opportunity of looking round too; and I am sure you will not require of him that he should feel any vexation in observing a pouting expression on Hetty's face as she listened to the gardener's small-talk. Yet in her secret heart she was glad to have him by her side, for she would perhaps learn from him how it was Arthur had not come to church. Not that she cared to ask him the question, but she hoped the information would be given spontaneously; for Mr Craig, like a superior man, was very fond of giving information.

Mr Craig was never aware that his conversation and advances were received coldly, for to shift one's point of view beyond certain limits is impossible to the most liberal and expansive mind; we are none of us aware of the impression we produce on Brazilian monkeys of feeble understanding — it is possible they see

hardly anything in us. Moreover, Mr Craig was a man of sober passions, and was already in his tenth year of hesitation as to the relative advantages of matrimony and bachelorhood. It is true that, now and then, when he had been a little heated by an extra glass of grog, he had been heard to say of Hetty that the 'lass was well enough', and that 'a man might do worse'; but on convivial occasions men are apt to express themselves strongly.

Martin Poyser held Mr Craig in honour, as a man who 'knew his business', and who had great lights concerning soils and compost; but he was less of a favourite with Mrs Poyser, who had more than once said in confidence to her husband, 'You're mighty fond o' Craig; but for my part, I think he's welly like a cock as thinks the sun's rose o' purpose to hear him crow.' For the rest, Mr Craig was an estimable gardener, and was not without reasons for having a high opinion of himself. He had also high shoulders and high cheek-bones, and hung his head forward a little, as he walked along with his hands in his breeches-pockets. I think it was his pedigree only that had the advantage of being Scotch, and not his 'bringing up'; for except that he had a stronger burr in his accent, his speech differed little from that of the Loamshire people about him. But a gardener is Scotch, as a French teacher is Parisian.

'Well, Mr Poyser,' he said, before the good slow farmer had time to speak, 'ye'll not be carrying your hay to-morrow, I'm thinking: the glass sticks at "change", and ye may rely upo' my word as we'll ha' more downfall afore twenty-four hours is past. Ye see that darkish blue cloud there upo' the 'rizon — ye know what I mean by the 'rizon, where the land and sky seems to meet?'

'Ay, ay, I see the cloud,' said Mr Poyser, ''rizon or no 'rizon. It's right o'er Mike Holdsworth's fallow, and a foul fallow it is.'

'Well, you mark my words, as that cloud 'ull spread o'er the sky pretty nigh as quick as you'd spread a tarpaulin over one o' your hay-ricks. It's a great thing to ha' studied the look o' the clouds. Lord bless you! th' met'orological almanecks can learn me nothing, but there's a pretty sight o' things I could let *them* up to, if they'd just come to me. And how are *you,* Mrs Poyser? — thinking o' getherin' the red currants soon, I reckon. You'd a deal better gether 'em afore they're o'er-ripe, wi' such weather as we've got to look forward to. How do ye do, Mistress Bede?' Mr Craig continued, without a pause, nodding by the way to Adam and Seth. 'I hope y' enjoyed them spinach and gooseberries as I sent Chester with th' other day. If ye want vegetables while ye're in trouble, ye know where to come to. It's well known I'm not giving other folks' things away; for when I've supplied the house, the garden's my own spekilation, and it isna every man th' old Squire could get as 'ud be equil to the undertaking, let alone asking whether he'd be willing. I've got to run my calkilation fine, I can tell you, to make sure o' getting back the money as I pay the Squire. I should like to see some o' them fellows as make the almanecks looking as far before their noses as I've got to do every year as comes.'

'They look pretty fur, though,' said Mr Poyser, turning his head on one side, and speaking in rather a subdued reverential tone. 'Why, what could come truer nor that pictur o' the cock wi' the big spurs, as has got its head knocked down wi' th' anchor, an' th' firin', an' the ships behind? Why, that pictur was made afore Christmas, and yit it's come as true as th' Bible. Why, th' cock's France, an' th' anchor's Nelson[20] — an' they told us that beforehand.'

'Pee — ee-eh!' said Mr Craig. 'A man doesna want to see fur to know as th' English 'ull beat the French. Why, I know upo' good authority as it's a big Frenchman as reaches five foot high, an' they live upo' spoon-meat[21] mostly. I knew a man as his father had a particular knowledge o' the French. I should like to know what them grasshoppers are to do against such fine fellows as our young Captain Arthur. Why, it 'ud astonish a Frenchman only to look at him; his arm's thicker nor a Frenchman's body, I'll be bound, for they pinch theirsells in wi' stays; and it's easy enough, for they've got nothing i' their insides.'

'Where *is* the Captain, as he wasna at church to-day?' said Adam. 'I was talking to him o' Friday, and he said nothing about his going away.'

'Oh, he's only gone to Eagledale for a bit o' fishing; I reckon he'll be back again afore many days are o'er, for he's to be at all th' arranging and preparing o' things for the comin' o' age o' the 30th o' July. But he's fond o' getting away for a bit, now and then. Him and th' old Squire fit one another like frost and flowers.'

Mr Craig smiled and winked slowly as he made this last observation, but the subject was not developed farther, for now they had reached the turning in the road where Adam and his companions must say 'good-bye'. The gardener, too, would have had to turn off in the same direction if he had not accepted Mr Poyser's invitation to tea. Mrs Poyser duly seconded the invitation, for she would have held it a deep disgrace not to make her neighbours welcome to her house: personal likes and dislikes must not interfere with that sacred custom. Moreover, Mr Craig had always been full of civilities to the family at the Hall Farm, and Mrs Poyser was scrupulous in declaring that she had 'nothing to say again' him, On'y it was a pity he couldna be hatched o'er again, an' hatched different'.

So Adam and Seth, with their mother between them, wound their way down to the valley and up again to the old house, where a saddened memory had taken the place of a long, long anxiety — where Adam would never have to ask again as he entered, ‘Where’s father?’

And the other family party, with Mr Craig for company, went back to the pleasant bright house-place at the Hall Farm — all with quiet minds, except Hetty, who knew now where Arthur was gone, but was only the more puzzled and uneasy. For it appeared that his absence was quite voluntary; he need not have gone — he would not have gone if he had wanted to see her. She had a sickening sense that no lot could ever be pleasant to her again if her Thursday night’s vision was not to be fulfilled; and in this moment of chill, bare, wintry disappointment and doubt, she looked towards the possibility of being with Arthur again, of meeting his loving glance, and hearing his soft words, with that eager yearning which one may call the ‘growing pain’ of passion.

CHAPTER XIX

Adam on a Working Day

Notwithstanding Mr Craig's prophecy, the dark-blue cloud dispersed itself without having produced the threatened consequences. 'The weather,' as he observed the next morning – 'the weather, you see, 's a ticklish thing, an' a fool 'ull hit on't sometimes when a wise man misses; that's why the almanecks get so much credit. It's one o' them chancy things as fools thrive on.'

This unreasonable behaviour of the weather, however, could displease no one else in Hayslope beside Mr Craig. All hands were to be out in the meadows this morning as soon as the dew had risen; the wives and daughters did double work in every farmhouse, that the maids might give their help in tossing the hay; and when Adam was marching along the lanes, with his basket of tools over his shoulder, he caught the sound of jocose talk and ringing laughter from behind the hedges. The jocose talk of haymakers is best at a distance; like those clumsy bells round the cows' necks, it has rather a coarse sound when it comes close, and may even grate on your ears painfully; but heard from far off, it mingles very prettily with the other joyous sounds of nature. Men's muscles move better when their souls are making merry music, though their merriment is of a poor blundering sort, not at all like the merriment of birds.

And perhaps there is no time in a summer's day more cheering, than when the warmth of the sun is just beginning to triumph over the freshness of the morning — when there is just a lingering hint of early coolness to keep off languor under the delicious influence of warmth. The reason Adam was walking along the lanes at this time was because his work for the rest of the day lay at a country house about three miles off, which was being put in repair for the son of a neighbouring squire; and he had been busy since early morning with the packing of panels, doors, and chimney-pieces, in a waggon which was now gone on before him, while Jonathan Bürge himself had ridden to the spot on horseback, to await its arrival and direct the workmen.

This little walk was a rest to Adam, and he was unconsciously under the charm of the moment. It was summer morning in his heart, and he saw Hetty in the sunshine: a sunshine without glare — with slanting rays that tremble between the delicate shadows of the leaves. He thought, yesterday, when he put out his hand to her as they came out of church, that there was a touch of melancholy kindness in her face, such as he had not seen before, and he took it as a sign that she had some sympathy with his family trouble. Poor fellow! that touch of melancholy came from quite another source; but how was he to know? We look at the one little woman's face we love, as we look at the face of our mother earth, and see all sorts of answers to our own yearnings. It was impossible for Adam not to feel that what had happened in the last week had brought the prospect of marriage nearer to him. Hitherto he had felt keenly the danger that some other man might step in and get possession of Hetty's heart and hand, while he himself was still in a position that made him shrink from asking her to accept him. Even if he had had a strong hope that she was fond of him — and his hope was far from being strong — he had been too heavily burthened with other claims to provide a home for himself and Hetty — a home such as he could expect her to be content with after the comfort and plenty of the Farm. Like all strong natures, Adam had confidence in his ability to achieve something in the future; he felt sure he should some day, if he lived, be able to maintain a family, and make a good broad path for himself; but he had too cool a head not to estimate to the full the obstacles that were to be overcome. And the time would be so long! And there was Hetty, like a bright-cheeked apple hanging over the orchard wall, within sight of everybody, and everybody must long for her![1] To be sure, if she loved him very much, she would be content to wait for him: but *did* she love him? His hopes had never risen so high that he had dared to ask her. He was clear-sighted enough to be aware that her uncle and aunt would have looked kindly on his suit, and indeed without this encouragement he would never have persevered in going to the Farm; but it was impossible to come to any but fluctuating conclusions about Hetty's feelings. She was like a kitten, and had the same distractingly pretty looks, that meant nothing, for everybody that came near her.

But now he could not help saying to himself that the heaviest part of his burden was removed, and that even before the end of another year his circumstances might be brought into a shape that would allow him to think of marrying. It would always be a hard struggle with his mother, he knew: she would be jealous of any wife he might choose, and she had set her mind especially against Hetty — perhaps for no other reason

than that she suspected Hetty to be the woman he *had* chosen. It would never do, he feared, for his mother to live in the same house with him when he was married; and yet how hard she would think it if he asked her to leave him! Yes, there was a great deal of pain to be gone through with his mother, but it was a case in which he must make her feel that his will was strong — it would be better for her in the end. For himself, he would have liked that they should all live together till Seth was married, and they might have built a bit themselves to the old house, and made more room. He did not like 'to part wi' th' lad': they had hardly ever been separated for more than a day since they were born.

But Adam had no sooner caught his imagination leaping forward in this way — making arrangements for an uncertain future — than he checked himself. 'A pretty building I'm making, without either bricks or timber. I'm up i' the garret a'ready, and haven't so much as dug the foundation.' Whenever Adam was strongly convinced of any proposition, it took the form of a principle in his mind: it was knowledge to be acted on, as much as the knowledge that damp will cause rust. Perhaps here lay the secret of the hardness he had accused himself of: he had too little fellow-feeling with the weakness that errs in spite of foreseen consequences. Without this fellow-feeling, how are we to get enough patience and charity towards our stumbling, falling companions in the long and changeful journey? And there is but one way in which a strong determined soul can learn it — by getting his heart-strings bound round the weak and erring, so that he must share not only the outward consequence of their error, but their inward suffering. That is a long and hard lesson, and Adam had at present only learned the alphabet of it in his father's sudden death, which, by annihilating in an instant all that had stimulated his indignation, had sent a sudden rush of thought and memory over what had claimed his pity and tenderness.

But it was Adam's strength, not its correlative hardness, that influenced his meditations this morning. He had long made up his mind that it would be wrong as well as foolish for him to marry a blooming young girl, so long as he had no other prospect than that of growing poverty with a growing family. And his savings had been so constantly drawn upon (besides the terrible sweep of paying for Seth's substitute in the militia), that he had not enough money beforehand to furnish even a small cottage, and keep something in reserve against a rainy day. He had good hope that he should be 'firmer on his legs' by-and-by; but he could not be satisfied with a vague confidence in his arm and brain; he must have definite plans, and set about them at once. The partnership with Jonathan Bürge was not to be thought of at present — there were things implicitly tacked to it that he could not accept; but Adam thought that he and Seth might carry on a little business for themselves in addition to their journeyman's work, by buying a small stock of superior wood and making articles of household furniture, for which Adam had no end of contrivances. Seth might gain more by working at separate jobs under Adam's direction than by his journeyman's work, and Adam, in his over-hours, could do all the 'nice' work, that required peculiar skill. The money gained in this way, with the good wages he received as foreman, would soon enable them to get beforehand with the world, so sparingly as they would all live now. No sooner had this little plan shaped itself in his mind than he began to be busy with exact calculations about the wood to be bought, and the particular article of furniture that should be undertaken first — a kitchen cupboard of his own contrivance, with such an ingenious arrangement of sliding-doors and bolts, such convenient nooks for stowing household provender, and such a symmetrical result to the eye, that every good housewife would be in raptures with it, and fall through all the gradations of melancholy longing till her husband promised to buy it for her. Adam pictured to himself Mrs Poyser examining it with her keen eye, and trying in vain to find out a deficiency; and, of course, close to Mrs Poyser stood Hetty, and Adam was again beguiled from calculations and contrivances into dreams and hopes. Yes, he would go and see her this evening — it was so long since he had been at the Hall Farm. He would have liked to go to the night-school, to see why Bartle Massey had not been at church yesterday, for he feared his old friend was ill; but, unless he could manage both visits, this last must be put off till tomorrow — the desire to be near Hetty, and to speak to her again, was too strong.

As he made up his mind to this, he was coming very near to the end of his walk, within the sound of the hammers at work on the refitting of the old house. The sound of tools to a clever workman who loves his work is like the tentative sounds of the orchestra to the violinist who has to bear his part in the overture: the strong fibres begin their accustomed thrill, and what was a moment before joy, vexation, or ambition, begins its change into energy. All passion become strength when it has an outlet from the narrow limits of our personal lot in the labour of our right arm, the cunning of our right hand, or the still, creative activity of our thought. Look at Adam through the rest of the day, as he stands on the scaffolding with the two-feet ruler in his hand, whistling low while he considers how a difficulty about a floor-joist or a window-frame is to be overcome; or as he pushes one of the younger workmen aside, and takes his place in upheaving a weight of timber, saying, 'Let alone, lad! thee'st got too much gristle i' thy bones yet'; or as he fixes his keen black eyes on the motions of a workman on the other side of the room, and warns him that his distances are not right. Look at this broad-shouldered man with the bare muscular arms, and the thick firm black hair

tossed about like trodden meadow-grass whenever he takes off his paper cap, and with the strong barytone voice bursting every now and then into loud and solemn psalm-tunes, as if seeking an outlet for superfluous strength, yet presently checking himself, apparently crossed by some thought which jars with the singing. Perhaps, if you had not been already in the secret, you might not have guessed what sad memories, what warm affection, what tender fluttering hopes, had their home in this athletic body with the broken finger-nails — in this rough man, who knew no better lyrics than he could find in the Old and New Version[2] and an occasional hymn; who knew the smallest possible amount of profane history; and for whom the motion and shape of the earth, the course of the sun, and the changes of the seasons, lay in the region of mystery just made visible by fragmentary knowledge. It had cost Adam a great deal of trouble, and work in over-hours, to know what he knew over and above the secrets of his handicraft, and that acquaintance with mechanics and figures, and the nature of the materials he worked with, which was made easy to him by inborn inherited faculty — to get the mastery of his pen, and write a plain hand, to spell without any other mistakes than must in fairness be attributed to the unreasonable character of orthography rather than to any deficiency in the speller, and, moreover, to learn his musical notes and part-singing. Besides all this, he had read his Bible, including the apocryphal books; 'Poor Richard's Almanac', Taylor's 'Holy Living and Dying', 'The Pilgrim's Progress', with Bunyan's Life and 'Holy War', a great deal of Bailey's Dictionary, 'Valentine and Orson', and part of a 'History of Babylon',[3] which Bartle Massey had lent him. He might have had many more books from Bartle Massey, but he had no time for reading 'the commin print', as Lisbeth called it, so busy as he was with figures in all the leisure moments which he did not fill up with extra carpentry.

Adam, you perceive, was by no means a marvellous man, nor, properly speaking, a genius, yet I will not pretend that his was an ordinary character among workmen; and it would not be at all a safe conclusion that the next best man you may happen to see with a basket of tools over his shoulder and a paper cap on his head has the strong conscience and the strong sense, the blended susceptibility and self-command, of our friend Adam. He was not an average man. Yet such men as he are reared here and there in every generation of our peasant artisans — with an inheritance of affections nurtured by a simple family life of common need and common industry, and an inheritance of faculties trained in skilful courageous labour: they make their way upward, rarely as geniuses, most commonly as painstaking honest men, with the skill and conscience to do well the tasks that lie before them. Their lives have no discernible echo beyond the neighbourhood where they dwelt, but you are almost sure to find there some good piece of road, some building, some application of mineral produce, some improvement in farming practice, some reform of parish abuses, with which their names are associated by one or two generations after them. Their employers were the richer for them, the work of their hands has worn well, and the work of their brains has guided well the hands of other men. They went about in their youth in flannel or paper caps, in coats black with coal-dust or streaked with lime and red paint; in old age their white hairs are seen in a place of honour at church and at market, and they tell their well-dressed sons and daughters, seated round the bright hearth on winter evenings, how pleased they were when they first earned their twopence a-day. Others there are who die poor, and never put off the workman's coat on week-days: they have not had the art of getting rich; but they are men of trust, and when they die before the work is all out of them, it is as if some main screw had got loose in a machine; the master who employed them says, 'Where shall I find their like?'[4]

CHAPTER XX

Adam Visits the Hall Farm

Adam came back from his work in the empty waggon; that was why he had changed his clothes, and was ready to set out to the Hall Farm when it still wanted a quarter to seven.

'What's thee got thy Sunday cloose on for?' said Lisbeth, complainingly, as he came down-stairs. 'Thee artna goin' to th' school i' thy best coat?'

'No, mother,' said Adam, quietly. 'I'm going to the Hall Farm, but mayhap I may go to the school after, so thee mustna wonder if I'm a bit late. Seth 'ull be at home in half an hour – he's only gone to the village; so thee wutna mind.'

'Eh, an' what's thee got thy best cloose on for to go to th' Hall Farm? The Poyser folks see'd thee in 'em yesterday, I warrand. What dost mean by turnin' worki'day into Sunday a-that'n? It's poor keepin' company wi' folks as donna like to see thee i' thy workin' jacket.'

'Good-bye, mother, I can't stay,' said Adam, putting on his hat and going out.

But he had no sooner gone a few paces beyond the door than Lisbeth became uneasy at the thought that she had vexed him. Of course, the secret of her objection to the best clothes was her suspicion that they were put on for Hetty's sake; but deeper than all her peevishness lay the need that her son should love her. She hurried after him, and laid hold of his arm before he had got half-way down to the brook, and said, 'Nay, my lad, thee wutna go away angered wi' thy mother, an' her got nought to do but to sit by hersen an' think on thee?'

'Nay, nay, mother,' said Adam, gravely, and standing still while he put his arm on her shoulder, 'I'm not angered. But I wish, for thy own sake, thee'dst be more contented to let me do what I've made up my mind to do. I'll never be no other than a good son to thee as long as we live. But a man has other feelings besides what he owes to's father and mother; and thee oughtna to want to rule over me body and soul. And thee must make up thy mind, as I'll not give way to thee where I've a right to do what I like. So let us have no more words about it.'

'Eh,' said Lisbeth, not willing to show that she felt the real bearing of Adam's words, 'an' who likes to see thee i' thy best cloose better nor thy mother? An' when thee'st got thy face washed as clean as the smooth white pibble, an' thy hair combed so nice, and thy eyes a-sparklin' — what else is there as thy old mother should like to look at half so well? An' thee sha't put on thy Sunday cloose when thee lik'st for me — I'll Ne'er plague thee no moor about'n.'

'Well, well; good-bye, mother,' said Adam, kissing her, and hurrying away. He saw there was no other means of putting an end to the dialogue. Lisbeth stood still on the spot, shading her eyes and looking after him till he was quite out of sight. She felt to the full all the meaning that had lain in Adam's words, and, as she lost sight of him and turned back slowly into the house, she said aloud to herself — for it was her way to speak her thoughts aloud in the long days when her husband and sons were at their work — 'Eh, he'll be tellin' me as he's goin' to bring her home one o' these days; an' she'll be missis o'er me, and I mun look on, belike, while she uses the blue-edged platters, and breaks 'em, mayhap, though there's Ne'er been one broke sin' my old man an' me bought 'em at the fair twenty 'ear come next Whissuntide. Eh!' she went on, still louder, as she caught up her knitting from the table, 'but she'll Ne'er knit the lads' stockins, nor foot 'em nayther, while I live; an' when I'm gone, he'll bethink him as nobody 'ull Ne'er fit's leg an' foot as his old mother did. She'll know nothin' o' narrowin' an' heelin,' I warrand, an' she'll make a long toe as he canna get's boot on. That's what comes o' marr'in' young wenches. I war gone thirty, an' th' feyther too, afore we war married; an' young enough too. She'll be a poor dratchell[1] by then *she's* thirty, a-marr'in' a-that'n, afore her teeth's all come.'

Adam walked so fast that he was at the yard gate before seven. Martin Poyser and the grandfather were not yet come in from the meadow: every one was in the meadow, even to the black-and-tan terrier — no one kept watch in the yard but the bull-dog; and when Adam reached the house-door, which stood wide open, he saw there was no one in the bright clean house-place. But he guessed where Mrs Poyser and some one else would be, quite within hearing; so he knocked on the door and said in his strong voice, 'Mrs Poyser within?'

‘Come in, Mr Bede, come in,’ Mrs Poyser called out from the dairy. She always gave Adam this title when she received him in her own house. ‘You may come into the dairy if you will, for I canna justly leave the cheese.’

Adam walked into the dairy, where Mrs Poyser and Nancy were crushing the first evening cheese.

‘Why, you might think you war come to a dead-house,’ said Mrs Poyser, as he stood in the open doorway; ‘they’re all i’ the meadow; but Martin’s sure to be in afore long, for they’re leaving the hay cocked to-night, ready for carrying first thing to-morrow. I’ve been forced t’ have Nancy in, upo’ ‘count as Hetty must gether the red currans to-night; the fruit allays ripens so contrairy, just when every hand’s wanted. An’ there’s no trustin’ the children to gether it, for they put more into their own mouths nor into the basket; you might as well set the wasps to gether the fruit.’

Adam longed to say he would go into the garden till Mr Poyser came in, but he was not quite courageous enough, so he said, ‘I could be looking at your spinning-wheel, then, and see what wants doing to it. Perhaps it stands in the house, where I can find it?’

‘No, I’ve put it away in the right-hand parlour; but let it be till I can fetch it and show it you. I’d be glad now, if you’d go into the garden, and tell Hetty to send Totty in. The child ’ull run in if she’s told, an’ I know Hetty’s lettin’ her eat too many currans. I’ll be much obliged to you, Mr Bede, if you’ll go and send her in; an’ there’s the York and Lankester roses beautiful in the garden now — you’ll like to see ’em. But you’d like a drink o’ whey first, p’r’aps; I know you’re fond o’ whey, as most folks is when they hanna got to crush it out.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Poyser,’ said Adam; ‘a drink o’ whey’s allays a treat to me. I’d rather have it than beer any day.’

‘Ay, ay,’ said Mrs Poyser, reaching a small white basin that stood on the shelf, and dipping it into the whey-tub, ‘the smell o’ bread’s sweet t’ everybody but the baker. The Miss Irwines allays say, “Oh, Mrs Poyser, I envy you your dairy; and I envy you your chickens; and what a beautiful thing a farmhouse is, to be sure!” An’ I say, “Yes; a farmhouse is a fine thing for them as look on, an’ don’t know the liftin’, an’ the stannin’, an’ the worritin’ o’ th’ inside, as belongs to’t.”’

‘Why, Mrs Poyser, you wouldn’t like to live anywhere else but in a farmhouse, so well as you manage it,’ said Adam, taking the basin; ‘and there can be nothing to look at pleasanter nor a fine milch cow, standing up to’ts knees in pasture, and the new milk frothing in the pail, and the fresh butter ready for market, and the calves, and the poultry. Here’s to your health, and may you allays have strength to look after your own dairy, and set a pattern t’ all the farmers’ wives in the country.’

Mrs Poyser was not to be caught in the weakness of smiling at a compliment, but a quiet complacency overspread her face like a stealing sunbeam, and gave a milder glance than usual to her blue-grey eyes, as she looked at Adam drinking the whey. Ah! I think I taste that whey now — with a flavour so delicate that one can hardly distinguish it from an odour, and with that soft gliding warmth that fills one’s imagination with a still, happy dreaminess. And the light music of the dropping whey is in my ears, mingling with the twittering of a bird outside the wire network window — the window overlooking the garden, and shaded by tall Gueldres roses.[2]

‘Have a little more, Mr Bede?’ said Mrs Poyser, as Adam set down the basin.

‘No, thank you; I’ll go into the garden now, and send in the little lass.’

‘Ay, do; and tell her to come to her mother in the dairy.’

Adam walked round by the rick-yard, at present empty of ricks, to the little wooden gate leading into the garden — once the well-tended kitchen-garden of a manor-house; now, but for the handsome brick wall with stone coping that ran along one side of it, a true farmhouse garden, with hardy perennial flowers, unpruned fruit-trees, and kitchen vegetables growing together in careless, half-neglected abundance. In that leafy, flowery, bushy time, to look for any one in this garden was like playing at ‘hide-and-seek’. There were the tall hollyhocks beginning to flower, and dazzle the eye with their pink, white, and yellow; there were the syringas and Gueldres roses, all large and disorderly for want of trimming; there were leafy walls of scarlet beans and late peas; there was a row of bushy filberts in one direction, and in another a huge apple-tree making a barren circle under its low-spreading boughs. But what signified a barren patch or two? The garden was so large. There was always a superfluity of broad beans — it took nine or ten of Adam’s strides to get to the end of the uncut grass walk that ran by the side of them; and as for other vegetables, there was so much more room than was necessary for them, that in the rotation of crops a large flourishing bed of groundsel was of yearly occurrence on one spot or other. The very rose-trees, at which Adam stopped to pluck one, looked as if they grew wild; they were all huddled together in bushy masses, now flaunting with wide open petals, almost all of them of the streaked pink-and-white kind, which doubtless dated from the union of the houses of York and Lancaster.[3] Adam was wise enough to choose a compact Provence rose that

peeped out half-smothered by its flaunting scentless neighbours, and held it in his hand – he thought he should be more at ease holding something in his hand — as he walked on to the far end of the garden, where he remembered there was the largest row of currant-trees, not far off from the great yew-tree arbour.

But he had not gone many steps beyond the roses, when he heard the shaking of a bough, and a boy's voice saying –

'Now, then, Totty, hold out your pinny — there's a duck.'

The voice came from the boughs of a tall cherry-tree, where Adam had no difficulty in discerning a small blue-pinafored figure perched in a commodious position where the fruit was thickest. Doubtless Totty was below, behind the screen of peas. Yes — with her bonnet hanging down her back, and her fat face, dreadfully smeared with red juice, turned up towards the cherry-tree, while she held her little round hole of a mouth and her red-stained pinafore to receive the promised downfall. I am sorry to say, more than half the cherries that fell were hard and yellow instead of juicy and red; but Totty spent no time in useless regrets, and she was already sucking the third juiciest when Adam said, 'There now, Totty, you've got your cherries. Run into the house with 'em to mother — she wants you — she's in the dairy. Run in this minute — there's a good little girl.'

He lifted her up in his strong arms and kissed her as he spoke, a ceremony which Totty regarded as a tiresome interruption to cherry-eating; and when he set her down she trotted off quite silently towards the house, sucking her cherries as she went along.

'Tommy, my lad, take care you're not shot for a little thieving bird,' said Adam, as he walked on towards the currant-trees.

He could see there was a large basket at the end of the row: Hetty would not be far off, and Adam already felt as if she were looking at him. Yet when he turned the corner she was standing with her back towards him, and stooping to gather the low-hanging fruit. Strange that she had not heard him coming! perhaps it was because she was making the leaves rustle. She started when she became conscious that some one was near — started so violently that she dropped the basin with the currants in it, and then, when she saw it was Adam, she turned from pale to deep red. That blush made his heart beat with a new happiness. Hetty had never blushed at seeing him before.

'I frightened you,' he said, with a delicious sense that it didn't signify what he said, since Hetty seemed to feel as much as he did; 'let *me* pick the currants up.'

That was soon done, for they had only fallen in a tangled mass on the grass-plot, and Adam, as he rose and gave her the basin again, looked straight into her eyes with the subdued tenderness that belongs to the first moments of hopeful love.

Hetty did not turn away her eyes; her blush had subsided and she met his glance with a quiet sadness, which contented Adam, because it was so unlike anything he had seen in her before.

'There's not many more currants to get,' she said; 'I shall soon ha' done now.'

'I'll help you,' said Adam; and he fetched the large basket which was nearly full of currants, and set it close to them.

Not a word more was spoken as they gathered the currants. Adam's heart was too full to speak, and he thought Hetty knew all that was in it. She was not indifferent to his presence after all; she had blushed when she saw him, and then there was that touch of sadness about her which must surely mean love, since it was the opposite of her usual manner, which had often impressed him as indifference. And he could glance at her continually as she bent over the fruit, while the level evening sunbeams stole through the thick apple-tree boughs, and rested on her round cheek and neck as if they too were in love with her. It was to Adam the time that a man can least forget in after-life, — the time when he believes that the first woman he has ever loved betrays by a slight something — a word, a tone, a glance, the quivering of a lip or an eyelid — that she is at least beginning to love him in return. The sign is so slight, it is scarcely perceptible to the ear or eye — he could describe it to no one — it is a mere feather-touch, yet it seems to have changed his whole being, to have merged an uneasy yearning into a delicious unconsciousness of everything but the present moment. So much of our early gladness vanishes utterly from our memory: we can never recall the joy with which we laid our heads on our mother's bosom or rode on our father's back in childhood; doubtless that joy is wrought up into our nature, as the sunlight of long-past mornings is wrought up in the soft mellowness of the apricot; but it is gone for ever from our imagination, and we can only *believe* in the joy of childhood. But the first glad moment in our first love is a vision which returns to us to the last, and brings with it a thrill of feeling intense and special as the recurrent sensation of a sweet odour breathed in a far-off hour of happiness. It is a memory that gives a more exquisite touch to tenderness, that feeds the madness of jealousy, and adds the last keenness to the agony of despair.

Hetty bending over the red bunches, the level rays piercing the screen of apple-tree boughs, the length of

bushy garden beyond, his own emotion as he looked at her and believed that she was thinking of him, and that there was no need for them to talk — Adam remembered it all to the last moment of his life.

And Hetty? You know quite well that Adam was mistaken about her. Like many other men, he thought the signs of love for another were signs of love towards himself. When Adam was approaching unseen by her, she was absorbed as usual in thinking and wondering about Arthur's possible return: the sound of any man's footstep would have affected her just in the same way — she would have *felt* it might be Arthur before she had time to see, and the blood that forsook her cheek in the agitation of that momentary feeling would have rushed back again at the sight of any one else just as much as at the sight of Adam. He was not wrong in thinking that a change had come over Hetty: the anxieties and fears of a first passion, with which she was trembling, had become stronger than vanity, had given her for the first time that sense of helpless dependence on another's feeling which awakens the clinging deprecating womanhood even in the shallowest girl that can ever experience it, and creates in her a sensibility to kindness which found her quite hard before. For the first time Hetty felt that there was something soothing to her in Adam's timid yet manly tenderness: she wanted to be treated lovingly — oh, it was very hard to bear this blank of absence, silence, apparent indifference, after those moments of glowing love! She was not afraid that Adam would tease her with love-making and flattering speeches like her other admirers: he had always been so reserved to her: she could enjoy without any fear the sense that this strong brave man loved her, and was near her. It never entered into her mind that Adam was pitiable too — that Adam, too, must suffer one day.

Hetty, we know, was not the first woman that had behaved more gently to the man who loved her in vain, because she had herself begun to love another. It was a very old story; but Adam knew nothing about it, so he drank in the sweet delusion.

'That'll do,' said Hetty, after a little while. 'Aunt wants me to leave some on the trees. I'll take 'em in now.'

'It's very well I came to carry the basket,' said Adam, 'for it 'ud ha' been too heavy for your little arms.'

'No; I could ha' carried it with both hands.'

'Oh, I daresay,' said Adam, smiling, 'and been as long getting into the house as a little ant carrying a caterpillar. Have you ever seen those tiny fellows carrying things four times as big as themselves?'

'No,' said Hetty, indifferently, not caring to know the difficulties of ant-life.

'Oh, I used to watch 'em often when I was a lad. But now, you see, I can carry the basket with one arm, as if it was an empty nutshell, and give you th' other arm to lean on. Won't you? Such big arms as mine were made for little arms like yours to lean on.'

Hetty smiled faintly, and put her arm within his. Adam looked down at her, but her eyes were turned dreamily towards another corner of the garden.

'Have you ever been to Eagledale?' she said, as they walked slowly along.

'Yes,' said Adam, pleased to have her ask a question about himself; 'ten years ago, when I was a lad, I went with father to see about some work there. It's a wonderful sight — rocks and caves such as you never saw in your life. I never had a right notion o' rocks till I went there.'

'How long did it take to get there?'

'Why, it took us the best part o' two days' walking. But it's nothing of a day's journey for anybody as has got a first-rate nag. The Captain 'ud get there in nine or ten hours, I'll be bound, he's such a rider. And I shouldn't wonder if he's back again to-morrow; he's too active to rest long in that lonely place, all by himself, for there's nothing but a bit of a inn i' that part where he's gone to fish. I wish he'd got th' estate in his hands; that 'ud be the right thing for him, for it 'ud give him plenty to do, and he'd do't well too, for all he's so young; he's got better notions o' things than many a man twice his age. He spoke very handsome to me th' other day about lending me money to set up i' business; and if things came round that way, I'd rather be beholding to him nor to any man i' the world.'

Poor Adam was led on to speak about Arthur because he thought Hetty would be pleased to know that the young squire was so ready to befriend him; the fact entered into his future prospects, which he would like to seem promising in her eyes. And it was true that Hetty listened with an interest which brought a new light into her eyes and a half smile upon her lips.

'How pretty the roses are now!' Adam continued, pausing to look at them. 'See! I stole the prettiest, but I didna mean to keep it myself. I think these as are all pink, and have got a finer sort o' green leaves, are prettier than the striped uns, don't you?'

He set down the basket, and took the rose from his button-hole.

'It smells very sweet,' he said; 'those striped uns have no smell. Stick it in your frock, and then you can put it in water after. It 'ud be a pity to let it fade.'

Hetty took the rose, smiling as she did so at the pleasant thought that Arthur could so soon get back if he

liked. There was a flash of hope and happiness in her mind, and with a sudden impulse of gaiety she did what she had very often done before — stuck the rose in her hair a little above the left ear. The tender admiration in Adam's face was slightly shadowed by reluctant disapproval. Hetty's love of finery was just the thing that would most provoke his mother, and he himself disliked it as much as it was possible for him to dislike anything that belonged to her.

'Ah,' he said, 'that's like the ladies in the pictures at the Chase; they've mostly got flowers or feathers or gold things i' their hair, but somehow I don't like to see 'em: they allays put me i' mind o' the painted women outside the shows at Treddles'on fair. What can a woman have to set her off better than her own hair, when it curls so, like yours? If a woman's young and pretty, I think you can see her good looks all the better for her being plain dressed. Why, Dinah Morris looks very nice, for all she wears such a plain cap and gown. It seems to me as a woman's face doesna want flowers; it's almost like a flower itself. I'm sure yours is.'

'Oh, very well,' said Hetty, with a little playful pout, taking the rose out of her hair. 'I'll put one o' Dinah's caps on when we go in, and you'll see if I look better in it. She left one behind, so I can take the pattern.'

'Nay, nay, I don't want you to wear a Methodist cap like Dinah's. I daresay it's a very ugly cap, and I used to think when I saw her here, as it was nonsense for her to dress different t' other people; but I never rightly noticed her till she came to see mother last week, and then I thought the cap seemed to fit her face somehow as th' acorn cup fits th' acorn, and I shouldn't like to see her so well without it. But you've got another sort o' face; I'd have you just as you are now, without anything t' interfere with your own looks. It's like when a man's singing a good tune, you don't want t' hear bells tinkling and interfering wi' the sound.'

He took her arm and put it within his again, looking down on her fondly. He was afraid she should think he had lectured her; imagining, as we are apt to do, that she had perceived all the thoughts he had only half expressed. And the thing he dreaded most was lest any cloud should come over this evening's happiness. For the world he would not have spoken of his love to Hetty yet, till this commencing kindness towards him should have grown into unmistakable love. In his imagination he saw long years of his future life stretching before him, blest with the right to call Hetty his own: he could be content with very little at present. So he took up the basket of currants once more, and they went on towards the house.

The scene had quite changed in the half-hour that Adam had been in the garden. The yard was full of life now: Marty was letting the screaming geese through the gate, and wickedly provoking the gander by hissing at him; the granary-door was groaning on its hinges as Alick shut it, after dealing out the corn; the horses were being led out to watering, amidst much barking of all the three dogs, and many 'whups' from Tim the ploughman, as if the heavy animals who held down their meek, intelligent heads, and lifted their shaggy feet so deliberately, were likely to rush wildly in every direction but the right. Everybody was come back from the meadow; and when Hetty and Adam entered the house-place, Mr Poyser was seated in the three-cornered chair, and the grandfather in the large arm-chair opposite, looking on with pleasant expectation while the supper was being laid on the oak table. Mrs Poyser had laid the cloth herself — a cloth made of homespun linen, with a shining checkered pattern on it, and of an agreeable whitey-brown hue, such as all sensible housewives like to see — none of your bleached 'shop-rag' that would wear into holes in no time, but good homespun that would last for two generations. The cold veal, the fresh lettuces, and the stuffed chine, might well look tempting to hungry men who had dined at half-past twelve o'clock. On the large deal table against the wall there were bright pewter plates and spoons and cans, ready for Alick and his companions; for the master and servants ate their supper not far off each other; which was all the pleasanter, because if a remark about to-morrow morning's work occurred to Mr Poyser, Alick was at hand to hear it.

'Well, Adam, I'm glad to see ye,' said Mr Poyser. 'What! ye've been helping Hetty to gether the currans, eh? Come, sit ye down, sit ye down. Why, it's pretty near a three-week since y' had your supper with us; and the missis has got one of her rare stuffed chines. I'm glad ye're come.'

'Hetty,' said Mrs Poyser, as she looked into the basket of currants to see if the fruit was fine, 'run up-stairs, and send Molly down. She's putting Totty to bed, and I want her to draw th' ale, for Nancy's busy yet i' the dairy. You can see to the child. But whativer did you let her run away from you along wi' Tommy for, and stuff herself wi' fruit as she can't eat a bit o' good victual?'

This was said in a lower tone than usual, while her husband was talking to Adam; for Mrs Poyser was strict in adherence to her own rules of propriety, and she considered that a young girl was not to be treated sharply in the presence of a respectable man who was courting her. That would not be fair-play: every woman was young in her turn, and had her chances of matrimony, which it was a point of honour for other women not to spoil — just as one market-woman who has sold her own eggs must not try to balk another of a customer.

Hetty made haste to run away up-stairs, not easily finding an answer to her aunt's question, and Mrs Poyser went out to see after Marty and Tommy, and bring them in to supper.

Soon they were all seated — the two rosy lads, one on each side, by the pale mother, a place being left for Hetty between Adam and her uncle. Alick too was come in, and was seated in his far corner, eating cold broad beans out of a large dish with his pocket-knife, and finding a flavour in them which he would not have exchanged for the finest pine-apple.

'What a time that gell is drawing th' ale, to be sure!' said Mrs Poyser, when she was dispensing her slices of stuffed chine. 'I think she sets the jug under and forgets to turn the tap, as there's nothing you can't believe o' them wenches: they'll set the empty kettle o' the fire, and then come an hour after to see if the water boils.'

'She's drawin' for the men too,' said Mr Poyser. 'Thee shouldst ha' told her to bring our jug up first.'

'Told her?' said Mrs Poyser: 'Yes, I might spend all the wind i' my body, an' take the bellows too, if I was to tell them gells everything as their own sharpness wonna tell 'em. Mr Bede, will you take some vinegar with your lettuce? Ay, you're i' the right not. It spoils the flavour o' the chine, to my thinking. It's poor eating where the flavour o' the meat lies i' the cruets. There's folks as make bad butter, and trusten to the salt t' hide it.'

Mrs Poyser's attention was here diverted by the appearance of Molly, carrying a large jug, two small mugs, and four drinking-cans, all full of ale or small beer — an interesting example of the prehensile power possessed by the human hand. Poor Molly's mouth was rather wider open than usual, as she walked along with her eyes fixed on the double cluster of vessels in her hands, quite innocent of the expression in her mistress's eye.

'Molly, I niver knew your equils — to think o' your poor mother as is a widow, an' I took you wi' as good as no character, an' the times an' times I've told you'….

Molly had not seen the lightning, and the thunder shook her nerves the more for the want of that preparation. With a vague alarmed sense that she must somehow comport herself differently, she hastened her step a little towards the far deal table, where she might set down her cans — caught her foot in her apron, which had become untied, and fell with a crash and a splash into a pool of beer; whereupon a tittering explosion from Marty and Tommy, and a serious 'Ello!' from Mr Poyser, who saw his draught of ale unpleasantly deferred.

'There you go!' resumed Mrs Poyser, in a cutting tone, as she rose and went towards the cupboard while Molly began dolefully to pick up the fragments of pottery. 'It's what I told you 'ud come, over and over again; and there's your month's wage gone, and more, to pay for that jug as I've had i' the house this ten year, and nothing ever happened to't before; but the crockery you've broke sin' here in th' house you've been 'ud make a parson swear — God forgi' me for saying so; an' if it had been boiling wort[4] out o' the copper, it 'ud ha' been the same, and you'd ha' been scalded, and very like lamed for life, as there's no knowing but what you will be some day if you go on; for anybody 'ud think you'd got the St Vitus's Dance,[5] to see the things you've throwed down. It's a pity but what the bits was stacked up for you to see, though it's neither seeing nor hearing as 'ull make much odds to you — anybody 'ud think you war case-hardened.'

Poor Molly's tears were dropping fast by this time, and in her desperation at the lively movement of the beer-stream towards Alick's legs, she was converting her apron into a mop, while Mrs Poyser, opening the cupboard, turned a blighting eye upon her.

'Ah,' she went on, 'you'll do no good wi' crying an' making more wet to wipe up. It's all your own wilfulness, as I tell you, for there's nobody no call to break anything if they'll only go the right way to work. But wooden folks had need ha' wooden things t' handle. And here must I take the brown-and-white jug, as it's niver been used three times this year, and go down i' the cellar myself, and belike catch my death, and be laid up wi' inflammation'….

Mrs Poyser had turned round from the cupboard with the brown-and-white jug in her hand, when she caught sight of something at the other end of the kitchen; perhaps it was because she was already trembling and nervous that the apparition had so strong an effect on her; perhaps jug-breaking, like other crimes, has a contagious influence. However it was, she stared and started like a ghost-seer, and the precious brown-and-white jug fell to the ground, parting for ever with its spout and handle.

'Did ever anybody see the like?' she said, with a suddenly lowered tone, after a moment's bewildered glance round the room. 'The jugs are bewitched, *I* think. It's them nasty glazed handles — they slip o'er the finger like a snail.'

'Why, thee'st let thy own whip fly i' thy face,' said her husband, who had now joined in the laugh of the young ones.

'It's all very fine to look on and grin,' rejoined Mrs Poyser; 'but there's times when the crockery seems

alive, an' flies out o' your hand like a bird. It's like the glass, sometimes, 'ull crack as it stands. What is to be broke *will* be broke, for I never dropped a thing i' my life for want o' holding it, else I should never ha' kept the crockery all these 'ears as I bought at my own wedding. And Hetty, are you mad? Whativer do you mean by coming down i' that way, and making one think as there's a ghost a-walking i' th' house?'

A new outbreak of laughter, while Mrs Poyser was speaking, was caused, less by her sudden conversion to a fatalistic view of jug-breaking, than by that strange appearance of Hetty, which had startled her aunt. The little minx had found a black gown of her aunt's, and pinned it close round her neck to look like Dinah's, had made her hair as flat as she could, and had tied on one of Dinah's high-crowned borderless net-caps. The thought of Dinah's pale grave face and mild grey eyes, which the sight of the gown and cap brought with it, made it a laughable surprise enough to see them replaced by Hetty's round rosy cheeks and coquettish dark eyes. The boys got off their chairs and jumped round her, clapping their hands, and even Alick gave a low ventral laugh as he looked up from his beans. Under cover of the noise, Mrs Poyser went into the back kitchen to send Nancy into the cellar with the great pewter measure, which had some chance of being free from bewitchment.

'Why, Hetty, lass, are ye turned Methodist?' said Mr Poyser, with that comfortable slow enjoyment of a laugh which one only sees in stout people. 'You must pull your face a deal longer before you'll do for one; mustna she, Adam? How come you to put them things on, eh?'

'Adam said he liked Dinah's cap and gown better nor my clothes,' said Hetty, sitting down demurely. 'He says folks look better in ugly clothes.'

'Nay, nay,' said Adam, looking at her admiringly; 'I only said they seemed to suit Dinah. But if I'd said you'd look pretty in 'em, I should ha' said nothing but what was true.'

'Why, thee thought'st Hetty war a ghost, didstna?' said Mr Poyser to his wife, who now came back and took her seat again. 'Thee look'dst as scared as scared.'

'It little sinnifies how I looked,' said Mrs Poyser; 'looks 'ull mend no jugs, nor laughing neither, as I see. Mr Bede, I'm sorry you've to wait so long for your ale, but it's coming in a minute. Make yourself at home wi' th' cold potatoes: I know you like 'em. Tommy, I'll send you to bed this minute, if you don't give over laughing. What is there to laugh at, I should like to know? I'd sooner cry nor laugh at the sight o' that poor thing's cap; and there's them as 'ud be better if they could make theirselves like her i' more ways nor putting on her cap. It little becomes anybody i' this house to make fun o' my sister's child, an' her just gone away from us, as it went to my heart to part wi' her: an' I know one thing, as if trouble was to come, an' I was to be laid up i' my bed, an' the children was to die — as there's no knowing but what they will — an' the murrain was to come among the cattle again, an' everything went to rack an' ruin – I say we might be glad to get sight o' Dinah's cap again, wi' her own face under it, border or no border. For she's one o' them things as looks the brightest on a rainy day, and loves you the best when you're most i' need on't.'

Mrs Poyser, you perceive, was aware that nothing would be so likely to expel the comic as the terrible. Tommy, who was of a susceptible disposition, and very fond of his mother, and who had, besides, eaten so many cherries as to have his feelings less under command than usual, was so affected by the dreadful picture she had made of the possible future, that he began to cry; and the good-natured father, indulgent to all weaknesses but those of negligent farmers, said to Hetty –

'You'd better take the things off again, my lass; it hurts your aunt to' see 'em.'

Hetty went up-stairs again, and the arrival of the ale made an agreeable diversion; for Adam had to give his opinion of the new tap, which could not be otherwise than complimentary to Mrs Poyser; and then followed a discussion on the secrets of good brewing, the folly of stinginess in 'hopping', and the doubtful economy of a farmer's making his own malt. Mrs Poyser had so many opportunities of expressing herself with weight on these subjects, that by the time supper was ended, the ale jug refilled, and Mr Poyser's pipe alight, she was once more in high good-humour, and ready, at Adam's request, to fetch the broken spinning-wheel for his inspection.

'Ah,' said Adam, looking at it carefully, 'here's a nice bit o' turning wanted. It's a pretty wheel. I must have it up at the turning-shop in the village, and do it there, for I've no convenence for turning at home. If you'll send it to Mr Burge's shop i' the morning, I'll get it done for you by Wednesday. I've been turning it over in my mind,' he continued, looking at Mr Poyser, 'to make a bit more convenence at home for nice jobs o' cabinet-making. I've always done a deal at such little things in odd hours, and they're profitable, for there's more workmanship nor material in 'em. I look for me and Seth to get a little business for ourselves i' that way, for I know a man at Rosseter as 'ull take as many things as we should make, besides what we could get orders for round about.'

Mr Poyser entered with interest into a project which seemed a step towards Adam's becoming a 'master-man'; and Mrs Poyser gave her approbation to the scheme of the movable kitchen cupboard, which was to

be capable of containing grocery, pickles, crockery, and house-linen, in the utmost compactness, without confusion. Hetty, once more in her own dress, with her neckerchief pushed a little backwards on this warm evening, was seated picking currants near the window, where Adam could see her quite well. And so the time passed pleasantly till Adam got up to go. He was pressed to come again soon, but not to stay longer, for at this busy time sensible people would not run the risk of being sleepy at five o'clock in the morning.

'I shall take a step farther,' said Adam, 'and go on to see Mester Massey, for he wasn't at church yesterday, and I've not seen him for a week past. I've never hardly known him to miss church before.'

'Ay,' said Mr Poyser, 'we've heared nothing about him, for it's the boys' hollodays[6] now, so we can give you no account.'

'But you'll niver think o' going there at this hour o' the night?' said Mrs Poyser, folding up her knitting.

'Oh, Mester Massey sits up late,' said Adam. 'An' the night-school's not over yet. Some o' the men don't come till late – they've got so far to walk. And Bartle himself's never in bed till it's gone eleven.'

'I wouldna have him to live wi' me, then,' said Mrs Poyser, 'a-dropping candle-grease about, as you're like to tumble down o' the floor the first thing i' the morning.'

'Ay, eleven o'clock's late — it's late,' said old Martin. 'I Ne'er sot up so i' *my* life, not to say as it warna a marr'in', or a christenin', or a wake, or th' harvest-supper. Eleven o'clock's late.'

'Why, I sit up till after twelve often,' said Adam, laughing, 'but it isn't t' eat and drink extry, it's to work extry. Good-night, Mrs Poyser; good-night, Hetty.'

Hetty could only smile and not shake hands, for hers were dyed and damp with currant juice; but all the rest gave a hearty shake to the large palm that was held out to them, and said, 'Come again, come again!'

'Ay, think o' that now,' said Mr Poyser, when Adam was out on the causeway. 'Sitting up till past twelve to do extry work! Ye'll not find many men o' six-an'-twenty as 'ull do to put i' the shafts wi' him. If you can catch Adam for a husband, Hetty, you'll ride i' your own spring-cart some day, I'll be your warrant.'

Hetty was moving across the kitchen with the currants, so her uncle did not see the little toss of the head with which she answered him. To ride in a spring-cart seemed a very miserable lot indeed to her now.

CHAPTER XXI

The Night-Scbool and the Schoolmaster

Bartle Massey's was one of a few scattered houses on the edge of a common, which was divided by the road to Treddleston. Adam reached it in a quarter of an hour after leaving the Hall Farm; and when he had his hand on the door-latch, he could see, through the curtainless window, that there were eight or nine heads bending over the desks, lighted by thin dips.[1]

When he entered, a reading lesson was going forward, and Bartle Massey merely nodded, leaving him to take his place where he pleased. He had not come for the sake of a lesson to-night, and his mind was too full of personal matters, too full of the last two hours he had passed in Hetty's presence, for him to amuse himself with a book till school was over; so he sat down in a corner, and looked on with an absent mind. It was a sort of scene which Adam had beheld almost weekly for years; he knew by heart every arabesque flourish in the framed specimen of Bartle Massey's handwriting which hung over the schoolmaster's head, by way of keeping a lofty ideal before the minds of his pupils; he knew the backs of all the books on the shelf running along the whitewashed wall above the pegs for the slates; he knew exactly how many grains were gone out of the ear of Indian-corn that hung from one of the rafters; he had long ago exhausted the resources of his imagination in trying to think how the bunch of leathery sea-weed had looked and grown in its native element; and from the place where he sat, he could make nothing of the old map of England that hung against the opposite wall, for age had turned it of a fine yellow brown, something like that of a well-seasoned meerschaum.[2] The drama that was going on was almost as familiar as the scene, nevertheless habit had not made him indifferent to it, and even in his present self-absorbed mood, Adam felt a momentary stirring of the old fellow-feeling, as he looked at the rough men painfully holding pen or pencil with their cramped hands, or humbly labouring through their reading lesson.

The reading class now seated on the form in front of the schoolmaster's desk, consisted of the three most backward pupils. Adam would have known it, only by seeing Bartle Massey's face as he looked over his spectacles, which he had shifted to the ridge of his nose, not requiring them for present purposes. The face wore its mildest expression: the grizzled bushy eyebrows had taken their more acute angle of compassionate kindness, and the mouth, habitually compressed with a pout of the lower lip, was relaxed so as to be ready to speak a helpful word or syllable in a moment. This gentle expression was the more interesting because the schoolmaster's nose, an irregular aquiline twisted a little on one side, had rather a formidable character; and his brow, moreover, had that peculiar tension which always impresses one as a sign of a keen impatient temperament: the blue veins stood out like cords under the transparent yellow skin, and this intimidating brow was softened by no tendency to baldness, for the grey bristly hair, cut down to about an inch in length, stood round it in as close ranks as ever.

'Nay, Bill, nay,' Bartle was saying in a kind tone, as he nodded to Adam, 'begin that again, and then perhaps, it'll come to you what d, r, y, spells. It's the same lesson you read last week, you know.'

'Bill' was a sturdy fellow, aged four-and-twenty, an excellent stone-sawyer, who could get as good wages as any man in the trade of his years; but he found a reading lesson in words of one syllable a harder matter to deal with than the hardest stone he had ever had to saw. The letters, he complained, were so 'uncommon alike, there was no tellin' 'em one from another', the sawyer's business not being concerned with minute differences such as exist between a letter with its tail turned up and a letter with its tail turned down. But Bill had a firm determination that he would learn to read, founded chiefly on two reasons: first, that Tom Hazelow, his cousin, could read anything 'right off', whether it was print or writing, and Tom had sent him a letter from twenty miles off, saying how he was prospering in the world, and had got an overlooker's place; secondly, that Sam Phillips, who sawed with him, had learned to read when he was turned twenty; and what could be done by a little fellow like Sam Phillips, Bill considered, could be done by himself, seeing that he could pound Sam into wet clay if circumstances required it. So here he was, pointing his big finger towards three words at once, and turning his head on one side that he might keep better hold with his eye of the one word which was to be discriminated out of the group. The amount of knowledge Bartle Massey must possess was something so dim and vast that Bill's imagination recoiled before it: he would hardly have ventured to deny that the schoolmaster might have something to do in bringing about the regular return of daylight and the changes in the weather.

The man seated next to Bill was of a very different type: he was a Methodist brickmaker, who, after spending thirty years of his life in perfect satisfaction with his ignorance, had lately ‘got religion’, and along with it the desire to read the Bible. But with him, too, learning was a heavy business, and on his way out to-night he had offered as usual a special prayer for help, seeing that he had undertaken this hard task with a single eye to the nourishment of his soul — that he might have a greater abundance of texts and hymns wherewith to banish evil memories and the temptations of old habit; or, in brief language, the devil. For the brickmaker had been a notorious poacher, and was suspected, though there was no good evidence against him, of being the man who had shot a neighbouring gamekeeper in the leg. However that might be, it is certain that shortly after the accident referred to, which was coincident with the arrival of an awakening Methodist preacher at Treddleston, a great change had been observed in the brickmaker; and though he was still known in the neighbourhood by his old sobriquet of ‘Brimstone’,[3] there was nothing he held in so much horror as any farther transactions with that evil-smelling element. He was a broad-chested fellow, with a fervid temperament, which helped him better in imbibing religious ideas than in the dry process of acquiring the mere human knowledge of the alphabet. Indeed, he had been already a little shaken in his resolution by a brother Methodist, who assured him that the letter was a mere obstruction to the Spirit, and expressed a fear that Brimstone was too eager for the knowledge that puffeth up.

The third beginner was a much more promising pupil. He was a tall but thin and wiry man, nearly as old as Brimstone, with a very pale face, and hands stained a deep blue. He was a dyer, who, in the course of dipping homespun wool and old women’s petticoats, had got fired with the ambition to learn a great deal more about the strange secrets of colour. He had already a high reputation in the district for his dyes, and he was bent on discovering some method by which he could reduce the expense of crimsons and scarlets. The druggist at Treddleston had given him a notion that he might save himself a great deal of labour and expense if he could learn to read, and so he had begun to give his spare hours to the night-school, resolving that his ‘little chap’ should lose no time in coming to Mr Massey’s day-school as soon as he was old enough.

It was touching to see these three big men, with the marks of their hard labour about them, anxiously bending over the worn books, and painfully making out, ‘The grass is green’, ‘The sticks are dry’, ‘The corn is ripe’ — a very hard lesson to pass to after columns of single words all alike except in the first letter. It was almost as if three rough animals were making humble efforts to learn how they might become human. And it touched the tenderest fibre in Bartle Massey’s nature, for such full-grown children as these were the only pupils for whom he had no severe epithets, and no impatient tones. He was not gifted with an imperturbable temper, and on music-nights it was apparent that patience could never be an easy virtue to him; but this evening, as he glances over his spectacles at Bill Downes, the sawyer, who is turning his head on one side with a desperate sense of blankness before the letters d, r, y, his eyes shed their mildest and most encouraging light.

After the reading class, two youths, between sixteen and nineteen, came up with imaginary bills of parcels, which they had been writing out on their slates, and were now required to calculate ‘off-hand’ — a test which they stood with such imperfect success that Bartle Massey, whose eyes had been glaring at them ominously through his spectacles for some minutes, at length burst out in a bitter, high-pitched tone, pausing between every sentence to rap the floor with a knobbed stick which rested between his legs.

‘Now, you see, you don’t do this thing a bit better than you did a fortnight ago; and I’ll tell you what’s the reason. You want to learn accounts; that’s well and good. But you think all you need do to learn accounts is to come to me and do sums for an hour or so, two or three times a-week; and no sooner do you get your caps on and turn out of doors again, than you sweep the whole thing clean out of your mind. You go whistling about, and take no more care what you’re thinking of than if your heads were gutters for any rubbish to swill through that happened to be in the way; and if you get a good notion in ’em, it’s pretty soon washed out again. You think knowledge is to be got cheap — you’ll come and pay Bartle Massey sixpence a-week, and he’ll make you clever at figures without your taking any trouble. But knowledge isn’t to be got with paying sixpence, let me tell you: if you’re to know figures, you must turn ’em over in your own heads, and keep your thoughts fixed on ’em. There’s nothing you can’t turn into a sum, for there’s nothing but what’s got number in it — even a fool. You may say to yourselves, “I’m one fool, and Jack’s another; if my fool’s head weighed four pound, and Jack’s three pound three ounces and three quarters, how many pennyweights heavier would my head be than Jack’s?” A man that had got his heart in learning figures would make sums for himself, and work ’em in his head: when he sat at his shoemaking, he’d count his stitches by fives, and then put a price on his stitches, say half a farthing, and then see how much money he could get in an hour; and then ask himself how much money he’d get in a day at that rate; and then how much ten workmen would get working three, or twenty, or a hundred years at that rate — and all the while his needle would be going just as fast as if he left his head empty for the devil to dance in. But the long and the short of it is — I’ll have nobody in my night-school that doesn’t strive to learn what he comes to learn,

as hard as if he was striving to get out of a dark hole into broad daylight. I'll send no man away because he's stupid: if Billy Taft, the idiot, wanted to learn anything, I'd not refuse to teach him. But I'll not throw away good knowledge on people who think they can get it by the sixpenn'orth, and carry it away with 'em as they would an ounce of snuff. So never come to me again, if you can't show that you've been working with your own heads, instead of thinking you can pay for mine to work for you. That's the last word I've got to say to you.'

With this final sentence, Bartle Massey gave a sharper rap than ever with his knobbed stick, and the discomfited lads got up to go with a sulky look. The other pupils had happily only their writing-books to show, in various stages of progress from pot-hooks to round text; and mere pen-strokes, however perverse, were less exasperating to Bartle than false arithmetic. He was a little more severe than usual on Jacob Storey's Z's, of which poor Jacob had written a pageful, all with their tops turned the wrong way, with a puzzled sense that they were not right 'somehow'. But he observed in apology, that it was a letter you never wanted hardly, and he thought it had only been put there 'to finish off th' alphabet, like, though ampus-and (&) would ha' done as well, for what he could see'.

At last the pupils had all taken their hats and said their 'Good-nights', and Adam, knowing his old master's habits, rose and said, 'Shall I put the candles out, Mr Massey?'

'Yes, my boy, yes, all but this, which I'll carry into the house; and just lock the outer door, now you're near it,' said Bartle, getting his stick in the fitting angle to help him in descending from his stool. He was no sooner on the ground than it became obvious why the stick was necessary — the left leg was much shorter than the right. But the schoolmaster was so active with his lameness, that it was hardly thought of as a misfortune; and if you had seen him make his way along the schoolroom floor, and up the step into his kitchen, you would perhaps have understood why the naughty boys sometimes felt that his pace might be indefinitely quickened, and that he and his stick might overtake them even in their swiftest run.

The moment he appeared at the kitchen door with the candle in his hand, a faint whimpering began in the chimney-corner, and a brown-and-tan-coloured bitch, of that wise-looking breed with short legs and long body, known to an unmechanical generation as turnspits, came creeping along the floor, wagging her tail, and hesitating at every other step, as if her affections were painfully divided between the hamper in the chimney-corner and the master, whom she could not leave without a greeting.

'Well, Vixen, well then, how are the babbies?' said the schoolmaster, making haste towards the chimney-corner, and holding the candle over the low hamper, where two extremely blind puppies lifted up their heads towards the light, from a nest of flannel and wool. Vixen could not even see her master look at them without painful excitement: she got into the hamper and got out again the next moment, and behaved with true feminine folly, though looking all the while as wise as a dwarf with a large old-fashioned head and body on the most abbreviated legs.

'Why, you've got a family, I see, Mr Massey?' said Adam, smiling, as he came into the kitchen. 'How's that? I thought it was against the law here.'

'Law? What's the use o' law when a man's once such a fool as to let a woman into his house?' said Bartle, turning away from the hamper with some bitterness. He always called Vixen a woman, and seemed to have lost all consciousness that he was using a figure of speech. 'If I'd known Vixen was a woman, I'd never have held the boys from drowning her; but when I'd got her into my hand, I was forced to take to her. And now you see what she's brought me to — the sly, hypocritical wench' – Bartle spoke these last words in a rasping tone of reproach, and looked at Vixen, who poked down her head and turned up her eyes towards him with a keen sense of opprobrium — 'and contrived to be brought to bed on a Sunday at church-time. I've wished again and again I'd been a bloody-minded man, that I could have strangled the mother and the brats with one cord.'

'I'm glad it was no worse a cause kept you from church,' said Adam. 'I was afraid you must be ill for the first time i' your life. And I was particular sorry not to have you at church yesterday.'

'Ah, my boy, I know why, I know why,' said Bartle, kindly, going up to Adam, and raising his hand up to the shoulder that was almost on a level with his own head. 'You've had a rough bit o' road to get over since I saw you — a rough bit o' road. But I'm in hopes there are better times coming for you. I've got some news to tell you. But I must get my supper first, for I'm hungry, I'm hungry. Sit down, sit down.'

Bartle went into his little pantry, and brought out an excellent home-baked loaf; for it was his one extravagance in these dear times to eat bread once a-day instead of oat-cake; and he justified it by observing, that what a schoolmaster wanted was brains, and oat-cake ran too much to bone instead of brains. Then came a piece of cheese and a quart jug with a crown of foam upon it. He placed them all on the round deal table which stood against his large arm-chair in the chimney-corner, with Vixen's hamper on one side of it, and a window-shelf with a few books piled up in it on the other. The table was as clean as if

Vixen had been an excellent housewife in a checkered apron; so was the quarry floor; and the old carved oaken press, table, and chairs, which in these days would be bought at a high price in aristocratic houses,[4] though, in that period of spider-legs and inlaid cupids, Bartle had got them for an old song, were as free from dust as things could be at the end of a summer's day.

'Now, then, my boy, draw up, draw up. We'll not talk about business till we've had our supper. No man can be wise on an empty stomach. But,' said Bartle, rising from his chair again, 'I must give Vixen her supper too, confound her! though she'll do nothing with it but nourish those unnecessary babbies. That's the way with these women, they've got no head-pieces to nourish, and so their food all runs either to fat or to brats.'

He brought out of the pantry a dish of scraps, which Vixen at once fixed her eyes on, and jumped out of her hamper to lick up with the utmost despatch.

'I've had my supper, Mr Massey,' said Adam, 'so I'll look on while you eat yours. I've been at the Hall Farm, and they always have their supper betimes, you know: they don't keep your late hours.'

'I know little about their hours,' said Bartle, dryly, cutting his bread and not shrinking from the crust. 'It's a house I seldom go into, though I'm fond of the boys, and Martin Poyser's a good fellow. There's too many women in the house for me: I hate the sound of women's voices; they're always either a-buzz or a-squeak — always either a-buzz or a-squeak. Mrs Poyser keeps at the top o' the talk like a fife; and as for the young lasses, I'd as soon look at water-grubs — I know what they'll turn to — stinging gnats, stinging gnats. Here, take some ale, my boy: it's been drawn for you — it's been drawn for you.'

'Nay, Mr Massey,' said Adam, who took his old friend's whim more seriously than usual to-night, 'don't be so hard on the creaturs God has made to be companions for us. A working man 'ud be badly off without a wife to see to th' house and the victual, and make things clean and comfortable.'

'Nonsense! It's the silliest lie a sensible man like you ever believed, to say a woman makes a house comfortable. It's a story got up, because the women are there, and something must be found for 'em to do. I tell you there isn't a thing under the sun that needs to be done at all, but what a man can do better than a woman, unless it's bearing children, and they do that in a poor make-shift way; it had better ha' been left to the men – it had better ha' been left to the men. I tell you, a woman 'ull bake you a pie every week of her life, and never come to see that the hotter th' oven the shorter the time. I tell you, a woman 'ull make your porridge every day for twenty years, and never think of measuring the proportion between the meal and the milk — a little more or less, she'll think, doesn't signify: the porridge *will* be awk'ard now and then: if it's wrong, it's summat in the meal, or it's summat in the milk, or it's summat in the water. Look at me! I make my own bread, and there's no difference between one batch and another from year's end to year's end; but if I'd got any other woman besides Vixen in the house, I must pray to the Lord every baking to give me patience if the bread turned out heavy. And as for cleanliness, my house is cleaner than any other house on the Common, though the half of 'em swarm with women. Will Baker's lad comes to help me in a morning, and we get as much cleaning done in one hour without any fuss, as a woman 'ud get done in three, and all the while be sending buckets o' water after your ankles, and let the fender and the fire-irons stand in the middle o' the floor half the day, for you to break your shins against 'em. Don't tell me about God having made such creatures to be companions for us! I don't say but He might make Eve to be a companion to Adam in Paradise — there was no cooking to be spoilt there, and no other woman to cackle with and make mischief; though you see what mischief she did as soon as she'd an opportunity. But it's an impious, unscriptural opinion to say a woman's a blessing to a man now; you might as well say adders and wasps, and foxes and wild beasts, are a blessing, when they're only the evils that belong to this state o' probation, which it's lawful for a man to keep as clear of as he can in this life, hoping to get quit of 'em for ever in another — hoping to get quit of 'em for ever in another.'

Bartle had become so excited and angry in the course of his invective that he had forgotten his supper, and only used the knife for the purpose of rapping the table with the haft. But towards the close, the raps became so sharp and frequent, and his voice so quarrelsome, that Vixen felt it incumbent on her to jump out of the hamper and bark vaguely.

'Quiet, Vixen!' snarled Bartle, turning round upon her. 'You're like the rest o' the women — always putting in *your* word before you know why.'

Vixen returned to her hamper again in humiliation, and her master continued his supper in a silence which Adam did not choose to interrupt; he knew the old man would be in a better humour when he had had his supper and lighted his pipe. Adam was used to hear him talk in this way, but had never learned so much of Bartle's past life as to know whether his view of married comfort was founded on experience. On that point Bartle was mute; and it was even a secret where he had lived previous to the twenty years in which, happily for the peasants and artisans of this neighbourhood, he had been settled among them as their only schoolmaster. If anything like a question was ventured on this subject, Bartle always replied, 'Oh,

I've seen many places — I've been a deal in the south' — and the Loamshire men would as soon have thought of asking for a particular town or village in Africa as in 'the south'.

'Now then, my boy,' said Bartle, at last, when he had poured out his second mug of ale and lighted his pipe — 'now then, we'll have a little talk. But tell me first, have you heard any particular news to-day?'

'No,' said Adam, 'not as I remember.'

'Ah, they'll keep it close, they'll keep it close, I daresay. But I found it out by chance; and it's news that may concern you, Adam, else I'm a man that don't know a superficial square foot from a solid.'

Here Bartle gave a series of fierce and rapid puffs, looking earnestly the while at Adam. Your impatient loquacious man has never any notion of keeping his pipe alight by gentle measured puffs; he is always letting it go nearly out, and then punishing it for that negligence. At last he said –

'Satchell's got a paralytic stroke. I found it out from the lad they sent to Treddleston for the doctor, before seven o'clock this morning. He's a good way beyond sixty, you know; it's much if he gets over it.'

'Well,' said Adam, 'I daresay there'd be more rejoicing than sorrow in the parish at his being laid up. He's been a selfish, tale-bearing, mischievous fellow; but, after all, there's nobody he's done so much harm to as to th' old Squire. Though it's the Squire himself as is to blame — making a stupid fellow like that a sort o' man-of-all-work, just to save th' expense of having a proper steward to look after th' estate. And he's lost more by ill-management o' the woods, I'll be bound, than 'ud pay for two stewards. If he's laid on the shelf, it's to be hoped he'll make way for a better man, but I don't see how it's like to make any difference to me.'

'But I see it, but I see it,' said Bartle; 'and others besides me. The Captain's coming of age now — you know that as well as I do — and it's to be expected he'll have a little more voice in things. And I know, and you know too, what 'ud be the Captain's wish about the woods, if there was a fair opportunity for making a change. He's said in plenty of people's hearing that he'd make you manager of the woods to-morrow, if he'd the power. Why, Carroll, Mr Irwine's butler, heard him say so to the parson not many days ago. Carroll looked in when we were smoking our pipes o' Saturday night at Casson's, and he told us about it; and whenever anybody says a good word for you, the parson's ready to back it, that I'll answer for. It was pretty well talked over, I can tell you, at Casson's, and one and another had their fling at you: for if donkeys set to work to sing, you're pretty sure what the tune 'ull be.'

'Why, did they talk it over before Mr Bürge?' said Adam; 'or wasn't he there o' Saturday?'

'Oh, he went away before Carroll came; and Casson — he's always for setting other folks right, you know — would have it Bürge was the man to have the management of the woods. "A substantial man," says he, "with pretty near sixty years' experience o' timber: it 'ud be all very well for Adam Bede to act under him, but it isn't to be supposed the Squire 'ud appoint a young fellow like Adam, when there's his elders and betters at hand!" But I said, "That's a pretty notion o' yours, Casson. Why, Bürge is the man to *buy* timber; would you put the woods into his hands, and let him make his own bargains? I think you don't leave your customers to score their own drink, do you? And as for age, what that's worth depends on the quality o' the liquor. It's pretty well known who's the backbone of Jonathan Burge's business."'

'I thank you for your good word, Mr Massey,' said Adam. 'But, for all that, Casson was partly i' the right for once. There's not much likelihood that th' old Squire 'ud ever consent t' employ me: I offended him about two years ago, and he's never forgiven me.'

'Why, how was that? You never told me about it,' said Bartle.

'Oh, it was a bit o' nonsense. I'd made a frame for a screen for Miss Lyddy — she's allays making something with her worsted-work, you know — and she'd given me particular orders about this screen, and there was as much talking and measuring as if we'd been planning a house. However, it was a nice bit o' work, and I liked doing it for her. But, you know, those little friggling[5] things take a deal o' time. I only worked at it in over-hours — often late at night — and I had to go to Treddleston over an' over again, about little bits o' brass nails and such gear; and I turned the little knobs and the legs, and carved th' open work, after a pattern, as nice as could be. And I was uncommon pleased with it when it was done. And when I took it home, Miss Lyddy sent for me to bring it into her drawing-room, so as she might give me directions about fastening on the work — very fine needlework, Jacob and Rachel a-kissing one another among the sheep,[6] like a picture — and th' old Squire was sitting there, for he mostly sits with her. Well, she was mighty pleased with the screen, and then she wanted to know what pay she was to give me. I didn't speak at random — you know it's not my way; I'd calculated pretty close, though I hadn't made out a bill, and I said, One pound thirteen. That was paying for the mater'als and paying me, but none too much, for my work. Th' old Squire looked up at this, and peered in his way at the screen, and said, "One pound thirteen for a gimcrack like that! Lydia, my dear, if you must spend money on these things, why don't you get them at Rosseter, instead of paying double price for clumsy work here? Such things are not work for a carpenter like Adam. Give him a guinea,[7] and no more." Well, Miss Lyddy, I reckon, believed what he told her, and

she's not over-fond o' parting with the money herself — she's not a bad woman at bottom, but she's been brought up under his thumb; so she began fidgeting with her purse, and turned as red as her ribbon. But I made a bow, and said, "No, thank you, madam; I'll make you a present o' the screen, if you please. I've charged the regular price for my work, and I know it's done well; and I know, begging his honour's pardon, that you couldn't get such a screen at Rosseter under two guineas. I'm willing to give you my work — it's been done in my own time, and nobody's got anything to do with it but me; but if I'm paid, I can't take a smaller price than I asked, because that 'ud be like saying, I'd asked more than was just. With your leave, madam, I'll bid you good-morning." I made my bow and went out before she'd time to say any more, for she stood with the purse in her hand, looking almost foolish. I didn't mean to be disrespectful, and I spoke as polite as I could; but I can give in to no man, if he wants to make it out as I'm trying t' overreach him. And in the evening the footman brought me the one pound thirteen wrapped in paper. But since then I've seen pretty clear as th' old Squire can't abide me.'

'That's likely enough, that's likely enough,' said Bartle, meditatively. 'The only way to bring him round would be to show him what was for his own interest, and that the Captain may do — that the Captain may do.'

'Nay, I don't know,' said Adam; 'the Squire's 'cute[8] enough, but it takes something else besides 'cuteness to make folks see what'll be their interest in the long-run. It takes some conscience and belief in right and wrong, I see that pretty clear. You'd hardly ever bring round th' old Squire to believe he'd gain as much in a straightfor'ard way as by tricks and turns. And, besides, I've not much mind to work under him: I don't want to quarrel with any gentleman, more particular an old gentleman turned eighty, and I know we couldn't agree long. If the Captain was master o' th' estate, it 'ud be different: he's got a conscience and a will to do right, and I'd sooner work for him nor for any man living.'

'Well, well, my boy, if good luck knocks at your door, don't you put your head out at window and tell it to be gone about its business, that's all. You must learn to deal with odd and even in life, as well as in figures. I tell you now, as I told you ten years ago, when you pommelled young Mike Holdsworth for wanting to pass a bad shilling, before you knew whether he was in jest or earnest — you're over-hasty and proud, and apt to set your teeth against folks that don't square to your notions. It's no harm for *me* to be a bit fiery and stiff-backed: I'm an old schoolmaster, and shall never want to get on to a higher perch. But where's the use of all the time I've spent in teaching you writing and mapping and mensuration, if you're not to get for'ard in the world, and show folks there's some advantage in having a head on your shoulders, instead of a turnip? Do you mean to go on turning up your nose at every opportunity, because it's got a bit of a smell about it that nobody finds out but yourself? It's as foolish as that notion o' yours that a wife is to make a working man comfortable. Stuff and nonsense! – stuff and nonsense! Leave that to fools that never got beyond a sum in simple addition. Simple addition enough! Add one fool to another fool, and in six years' time six fools more — they're all of the same denomination, big and little's nothing to do with the sum!'

During this rather heated exhortation to coolness and discretion the pipe had gone out, and Bartle gave the climax to his speech by striking a light furiously, after which he puffed with fierce resolution, fixing his eye still on Adam, who was trying not to laugh.

'There's a good deal o' sense in what you say, Mr Massey,' Adam began, as soon as he felt quite serious, 'as there always is. But you'll give in that it's no business o' mine to be building on chances that may never happen. What I've got to do is to work as well as I can with the tools and mater'als I've got in my hands. If a good chance comes to me, I'll think o' what you've been saying; but till then, I've got nothing to do but to trust to my own hands and my own head-piece. I'm turning over a little plan for Seth and me to go into the cabinet-making a bit by ourselves, and win a extra pound or two in that way. But it's getting late now — it'll be pretty near eleven before I'm at home, and mother may happen to lie awake; she's more fidgety nor usual now. So I'll bid you good-night.'

'Well, well, we'll go to the gate with you — it's a fine night,' said Bartle, taking up his stick. Vixen was at once on her legs, and without further words the three walked out into the starlight, by the side of Bartle's potato-beds, to the little gate.

'Come to the music o' Friday night, if you can, my boy,' said the old man, as he closed the gate after Adam, and leaned against it.

'Ay, ay,' said Adam, striding along towards the streak of pale road. He was the only object moving on the wide common. The two grey donkeys, just visible in front of the gorse bushes, stood as still as limestone images — as still as the grey-thatched roof of the mud cottage a little farther on. Bartle kept his eye on the moving figure till it passed into the darkness, while Vixen, in a state of divided affection, had twice run back to the house to bestow a parenthetic lick on her puppies.

'Ay, ay,' muttered the schoolmaster, as Adam disappeared; 'there you go, stalking along — stalking along;

but you wouldn't have been what you are if you hadn't had a bit of old lame Bartle inside you. The strongest calf must have something to suck at. There's plenty of these big, lumbering fellows 'ud never have known their A B c, if it hadn't been for Bartle Massey. Well, well, Vixen, you foolish wench, what is it, what is it? I must go in, must I? Ay, ay, I'm never to have a will o' my own any more. And those pups, what do you think I'm to do with 'em, when they're twice as big as you? — for I'm pretty sure the father was that hulking bull-terrier of Will Baker's — wasn't he now, eh, you sly hussey?' (Here Vixen tucked her tail between her legs, and ran forward into the house. Subjects are sometimes broached which a well-bred female will ignore.)

'But where's the use of talking to a woman with babbies?' continued Bartle: 'she's got no conscience — no conscience; it's all run to milk.'

BOOK THIRD

CHAPTER XXII

Going to the Birthday Feast

The thirtieth of July was come, and it was one of those half-dozen warm days which sometimes occur in the middle of a rainy English summer. No rain had fallen for the last three or four days, and the weather was perfect for that time of the year: there was less dust than usual on the dark-green hedgerows, and on the wild camomile that starred the roadside, yet the grass was dry enough for the little children to roll on it, and there was no cloud but a long dash of light, downy ripple, high, high up in the far-off blue sky. Perfect weather for an outdoor July merrymaking, yet surely not the best time of year to be born in. Nature seems to make a hot pause just then — all the loveliest flowers are gone; the sweet time of early growth and vague hopes is past; and yet the time of harvest and ingathering is not come, and we tremble at the possible storms that may ruin the precious fruit in the moment of its ripeness. The woods are all one dark monotonous green; the waggon-loads of hay no longer creep along the lanes, scattering their sweet-smelling fragments on the blackberry branches; the pastures are often a little tanned, yet the corn has not got its last splendour of red and gold; the lambs and calves have lost all traces of their innocent frisky prettiness, and have become stupid young sheep and cows. But it is a time of leisure on the farm — that pause between hay and corn harvest, and so the farmers and labourers in Hayslope and Broxton thought the Captain did well to come of age just then, when they could give their undivided minds to the flavour of the great cask of ale which had been brewed the autumn after ‘the heir’ was born, and was to be tapped on his twenty-first birthday. The air had been merry with the ringing of church-bells very early this morning, and every one had made haste to get through the needful work before twelve, when it would be time to think of getting ready to go to the Chase.

The mid-day sun was streaming into Hetty’s bed-chamber, and there was no blind to temper the heat with which it fell on her head as she looked at herself in the old specked glass. Still, that was the only glass she had in which she could see her neck and arms, for the small hanging glass she had fetched out of the next room — the room that had been Dinah’s — would show her nothing below her little chin, and that beautiful bit of neck where the roundness of her cheek melted into another roundness shadowed by dark delicate curls. And to-day she thought more than usual about her neck and arms; for at the dance this evening she was not to wear any neckerchief, and she had been busy yesterday with her spotted pink-and-white frock, that she might make the sleeves either long or short at will. She was dressed now just as she was to be in the evening, with a tucker made of ‘real’ lace, which her aunt had lent her for this unparalleled occasion, but with no ornaments besides; she had even taken out her small round earrings which she wore every day. But there was something more to be done, apparently, before she put on her neckerchief and long sleeves, which she was to wear in the day-time, for now she unlocked the drawer that held her private treasures. It is more than a month since we saw her unlock that drawer before, and now it holds new treasures, so much more precious than the old ones that these are thrust into the corner. Hetty would not care to put the large coloured glass earrings into her ears now; for see! she has got a beautiful pair of gold and pearls and garnet, lying snugly in a pretty little box lined with white satin. Oh the delight of taking out that little box and looking at the earrings! Do not reason about it, my philosophical reader, and say that Hetty, being very pretty, must have known that it did not signify whether she had on any ornaments or not; and that, moreover, to look at earrings which she could not possibly wear out of her bedroom could hardly be a satisfaction, the essence of vanity being a reference to the impressions produced on others; you will never understand women’s natures if you are so excessively rational. Try rather to divest yourself of all your rational prejudices, as much as if you were studying the psychology of a canary bird,[1] and only watch the movements of this pretty round creature as she turns her head on one side with an unconscious smile at the earrings nestled in the little box. Ah, you think, it is for the sake of the person who has given them to her,

and her thoughts are gone back now to the moment when they were put into her hands. No; else why should she have cared to have earrings rather than anything else? and I know that she had longed for earrings from among all the ornaments she could imagine.

'Little, little ears!' Arthur had said, pretending to pinch them one evening, as Hetty sat beside him on the grass without her hat. 'I wish I had some pretty earrings!' she said in a moment, almost before she knew what she was saying — the wish lay so close to her lips, it *would* flutter past them at the slightest breath. And the next day — it was only last week — Arthur had ridden over to Rosseter on purpose to buy them. That little wish so *naïvely* uttered, seemed to him the prettiest bit of childishness; he had never heard anything like it before; and he had wrapped the box up in a great many covers, that he might see Hetty unwrapping it with growing curiosity, till at last her eyes flashed back their new delight into his.

No, she was not thinking most of the giver when she smiled at the earrings, for now she is taking them out of the box, not to press them to her lips, but to fasten them in her ears, — only for one moment, to see how pretty they look, as she peeps at them in the glass against the wall, with first one position of the head and then another, like a listening bird. It is impossible to be wise on the subject of earrings as one looks at her; what should those delicate pearls and crystals be made for, if not for such ears? One cannot even find fault with the tiny round hole which they leave when they are taken out; perhaps water-nixies, and such lovely things without souls,[2] have these little round holes in their ears by nature, ready to hang jewels in. And Hetty must be one of them: it is too painful to think that she is a woman, with a woman's destiny before her — a woman spinning in young ignorance a light web of folly and vain hopes which may one day close round her and press upon her, a rancorous poisoned garment,[3] changing all at once her fluttering, trivial butterfly sensations into a life of deep human anguish.

But she cannot keep in the earrings long, else she may make her uncle and aunt wait. She puts them quickly into the box again, and shuts them up. Some day she will be able to wear any earrings she likes, and already she lives in an invisible world of brilliant costumes, shimmering gauze, soft satin, and velvet, such as the lady's-maid at the Chase has shown her in Miss Lydia's wardrobe: she feels the bracelets on her arms, and treads on a soft carpet in front of a tall mirror. But she has one thing in the drawer which she can venture to wear to-day, because she can hang it on the chain of dark-brown berries which she has been used to wear on grand days, with a tiny flat scent-bottle at the end of it tucked inside her frock; and she *must* put on her brown berries — her neck would look so unfinished without it. Hetty was not quite as fond of the locket as of the earrings, though it was a handsome large locket, with enamelled flowers at the back and a beautiful gold border round the glass, which showed a light-brown slightly waving lock, forming a background for two little dark rings. She must keep it under her clothes, and no one would see it. But Hetty had another passion, only a little less strong than her love of finery; and that other passion made her like to wear the locket even hidden in her bosom. She would always have worn it, if she had dared to encounter her aunt's questions about a ribbon round her neck. So now she slipped it on along her chain of dark-brown berries, and snapped the chain round her neck. It was not a very long chain, only allowing the locket to hang a little way below the edge of her frock. And now she had nothing to do but to put on her long sleeves, her new white gauze neckerchief, and her straw hat trimmed with white to-day instead of the pink, which had become rather faded under the July sun. That hat made the drop of bitterness in Hetty's cup to-day, for it was not quite new — everybody would see that it was a little tanned against the white ribbon — and Mary Bürge, she felt sure, would have a new hat or bonnet on. She looked for consolation at her fine white cotton stockings: they really were very nice indeed, and she had given almost all her spare money for them. Hetty's dream of the future could not make her insensible to triumph in the present: to be sure, Captain Donnithorne loved her so, that he would never care about looking at other people, but then those other people didn't know how he loved her, and she was not satisfied to appear shabby and insignificant in their eyes even for a short space.

The whole party was assembled in the house-place when Hetty went down, all of course in their Sunday clothes; and the bells had been ringing so this morning in honour of the Captain's twenty-first birthday, and the work had all been got done so early, that Marty and Tommy were not quite easy in their minds until their mother had assured them that going to church was not part of the day's festivities. Mr Poyser had once suggested that the house should be shut up, and left to take care of itself; 'for,' said he, 'there's no danger of anybody's breaking in — everybody'll be at the Chase, thieves an' all. If we lock th' house up, all the men can go: it's a day they wonna see twice i' their lives.' But Mrs Poyser answered with great decision: 'I never left th' house to take care of itself since I was a missis, and I never will. There's been ill-looking tramps enoo' about the place this last week, to carry off every ham an' every spoon we'n got; and they all collogue[4] together, them tramps, as it's a mercy they hanna come and pisoned the dogs and murdered us all in our beds afore we knowed, some Friday night when we'n got the money in th' house to pay the men. And it's like enough the tramps know where we're going as well as we do oursens; for if Old Harry[5] wants any

work done, you may be sure he'll find the means.'

'Nonsense about murdering us in our beds,' said Mr Poyser; 'I've got a gun i' our room, hanna I? and thee'st got ears as 'ud find it out if a mouse was gnawing the bacon. Howiver, if thee wouldstna be easy, Alick can stay at home i' the forepart o' the day, and Tim can come back tow'rds five o'clock, and let Alick have his turn. They may let Growler loose if anybody offers to do mischief, and there's Alick's dog, too, ready enough to set his tooth in a tramp if Alick gives him a wink.'

Mrs Poyser accepted this compromise, but thought it advisable to bar and bolt to the utmost; and now, at the last moment before starting, Nancy, the dairymaid, was closing the shutters of the house-place, although the window, lying under the immediate observation of Alick and the dogs, might have been supposed the least likely to be selected for a burglarious attempt.

The covered cart, without springs, was standing ready to carry the whole family except the men-servants: Mr Poyser and the grandfather sat on the seat in front, and within there was room for all the women and children; the fuller the cart the better, because then the jolting would not hurt so much, and Nancy's broad person and thick arms were an excellent cushion to be pitched on. But Mr Poyser drove at no more than a walking pace, that there might be as little risk of jolting as possible on this warm day; and there was time to exchange greetings and remarks with the foot-passengers who were going the same way, specking the paths between the green meadows and the golden cornfields with bits of movable bright colour – a scarlet waistcoat to match the poppies that nodded a little too thickly among the corn, or a dark-blue neckerchief with ends flaunting across a bran-new white smock-frock. All Broxton and all Hayslope were to be at the Chase, and make merry there in honour of 'th' heir';[6] and the old men and women, who had never been so far down this side of the hill for the last twenty years, were being brought from Broxton and Hayslope in one of the farmer's waggons, at Mr Irwine's suggestion. The church-bells had struck up again now — a last tune, before the ringers came down the hill to have their share in the festival; and before the bells had finished, other music was heard approaching, so that even Old Brown, the sober horse that was drawing Mr Poyser's cart, began to prick up his ears. It was the band of the Benefit Club,[7] which had mustered in all its glory; that is to say, in bright-blue scarfs and blue favours, and carrying its banner with the motto, 'Let brotherly love continue', encircling a picture of a stone-pit.

The carts, of course, were not to enter the Chase. Every one must get down at the lodges, and the vehicles must be sent back.

'Why, the Chase is like a fair a'ready,' said Mrs Poyser, as she got down from the cart, and saw the groups scattered under the great oaks, and the boys running about in the hot sunshine to survey the tall poles surmounted by the fluttering garments that were to be the prize of the successful climbers. 'I should ha' thought there wasna so many people i' the two parishes. Mercy on us! how hot it is out o' the shade! Come here, Totty, else your little face 'ull be burnt to a scratchin'! They might ha' cooked the dinners i' that open space, an' saved the fires. I shall go to Mrs Best's room an' sit down.'

'Stop a bit, stop a bit,' said Mr Poyser. 'There's th' waggin coming wi' th' old folks in't; it'll be such a sight as wonna come o'er again, to see 'em get down an' walk along all together. You remember some on 'em i' their prime, eh, father?'

'Ay, ay,' said old Martin, walking slowly under the shade of the lodge porch, from which he could see the aged party descend. 'I remember Jacob Taft walking fifty mile after the Scotch raybels,[8] when they turned back from Stoniton.'

He felt himself quite a youngster, with a long life before him, as he saw the Hayslope patriarch, old Feyther Taft, descend from the waggon and walk towards him, in his brown nightcap, and leaning on his two sticks.

'Well, Mester Taft,' shouted old Martin, at the utmost stretch of his voice, — for though he knew the old man was stone deaf, he could not omit the propriety of a greeting, — 'you're hearty yet. You can enjoy yoursen to-day, for-all you're ninety an' better.'

'Your sarvant, mesters, your sarvant,' said Feyther Taft in a treble tone, perceiving that he was in company.

The aged group, under care of sons or daughters, themselves worn and grey, passed on along the least-winding carriage-road towards the house, where a special table was prepared for them; while the Poyser party wisely struck across the grass under the shade of the great trees, but not out of view of the house-front, with its sloping lawn and flower-beds, or of the pretty striped marquee at the edge of the lawn, standing at right angles with two larger marquees on each side of the open green space where the games were to be played. The house would have been nothing but a plain square mansion of Queen Anne's time, but for the remnant of an old abbey to which it was united at one end, in much the same way as one may sometimes see a new farmhouse rising high and prim at the end of older and lower farm-offices. The fine

old remnant stood a little backward and under the shadow of tall beeches, but the sun was now on the taller and more advanced front, the blinds were all down, and the house seemed asleep in the hot mid-day: it made Hetty quite sad to look at it: Arthur must be somewhere in the back rooms, with the grand company, where he could not possibly know that she was come, and she should not see him for a long, long while — not till after dinner, when they said he was to come up and make a speech.

But Hetty was wrong in part of her conjecture. No grand company was come except the Irwines, for whom the carriage had been sent early, and Arthur was at that moment not in a back room, but walking with the Rector into the broad stone cloisters of the old abbey, where the long tables were laid for all the cottage tenants and the farm-servants. A very handsome young Briton he looked to-day, in high spirits and a bright-blue frock-coat, the highest mode — his arm no longer in a sling. So open-looking and candid, too; but candid people have their secrets, and secrets leave no lines in young faces.

'Upon my word,' he said, as they entered the cool cloisters, 'I think the cottagers have the best of it: these cloisters make a delightful dining-room on a hot day. That was capital advice of yours, Irwine, about the dinners — to let them be as orderly and comfortable as possible, and only for the tenants: especially as I had only a limited sum after all; for though my grandfather talked of a *carte blanche,* he couldn't make up his mind to trust me, when it came to the point.'

'Never mind, you'll give more pleasure in this quiet way,' said Mr Irwine. 'In this sort of thing people are constantly confounding liberality with riot and disorder. It sounds very grand to say that so many sheep and oxen were roasted whole, and everybody ate who liked to come; but in the end it generally happens that no one has had an enjoyable meal. If the people get a good dinner and a moderate quantity of ale in the middle of the day, they'll be able to enjoy the games as the day cools. You can't hinder some of them from getting too much towards evening, but drunkenness and darkness go better together than drunkenness and daylight.'

'Well, I hope there won't be much of it. I've kept the Treddleston people away, by having a feast for them in the town; and I've got Casson and Adam Bede, and some other good fellows, to look to the giving out of ale in the booths, and to take care things don't go too far. Come, let us go up above now, and see the dinner-tables for the large tenants.'

They went up the stone staircase leading simply to the long gallery above the cloisters, a gallery where all the dusty worthless old pictures had been banished for the last three generations — mouldy portraits of Queen Elizabeth and her ladies, General Monk with his eye knocked out, Daniel very much in the dark among the lions, and Julius Caesar on horseback, with a high nose and laurel crown, holding his Commentaries in his hand.[9]

'What a capital thing it is that they saved this piece of the old abbey!' said Arthur. 'If I'm ever master here, I shall do up the gallery in first-rate style: we've got no room in the house a third as large as this. That second table is for the farmers' wives and children: Mrs Best said it would be more comfortable for the mothers and children to be by themselves. I was determined to have the children, and make a regular family thing of it. I shall be the "old squire" to those little lads and lasses some day, and they'll tell their children what a much finer young fellow I was than my own son. There's a table for the women and children below as well. But you will see them all — you will come up with me after dinner, I hope?'

'Yes, to be sure,' said Mr Irwine. 'I wouldn't miss your maiden speech to the tenantry.'

'And there will be something else you'll like to hear,' said Arthur. 'Let us go into the library and I'll tell you all about it while my grandfather is in the drawing-room with the ladies. Something that will surprise you,' he continued, as they sat down. 'My grandfather has come round after all.'

'What, about Adam?'

'Yes; I should have ridden over to tell you about it, only I was so busy. You know I told you I had quite given up arguing the matter with him — I thought it was hopeless; but yesterday morning he asked me to come in here to him before I went out, and astonished me by saying that he had decided on all the new arrangements he should make in consequence of old Satchell being obliged to lay by work, and that he intended to employ Adam in superintending the woods at a salary of a guinea a-week, and the use of a pony to be kept here. I believe the secret of it is, he saw from the first it would be a profitable plan, but he had some particular dislike of Adam to get over – and besides, the fact that I propose a thing is generally a reason with him for rejecting it. There's the most curious contradiction in my grandfather: I know he means to leave me all the money he has saved, and he is likely enough to have cut off poor aunt Lydia, who has been a slave to him all her life, with only five hundred a-year, for the sake of giving me all the more; and yet I sometimes think he positively hates me because I'm his heir. I believe if I were to break my neck, he would feel it the greatest misfortune that could befall him, and yet it seems a pleasure to him to make my life a series of petty annoyances.'

‘Ah, my boy, it is not only woman’s love that is ἀπέρωτος ἔρως, as old Æschylus calls it.[10] There’s plenty of “unloving love” in the world of a masculine kind. But tell me about Adam. Has he accepted the post? I don’t see that it can be much more profitable than his present work, though, to be sure, it will leave him a good deal of time on his own hands.’

‘Well, I felt some doubt about it when I spoke to him, and he seemed to hesitate at first. His objection was, that he thought he should not be able to satisfy my grandfather. But I begged him as a personal favour to me not to let any reason prevent him from accepting the place, if he really liked the employment, and would not be giving up anything that was more profitable to him. And he assured me he should like it of all things; — it would be a great step forward for him in business, and it would enable him to do what he had long wished to do — to give up working for Bürge. He says he shall have plenty of time to superintend a little business of his own, which he and Seth will carry on, and will perhaps be able to enlarge by degrees. So he has agreed at last, and I have arranged that he shall dine with the large tenants to-day; and I mean to announce the appointment to them, and ask them to drink Adam’s health. It’s a little drama I’ve got up in honour of my friend Adam. He’s a fine fellow, and I like the opportunity of letting people know that I think so.’

‘A drama in which friend Arthur piques himself on having a pretty part to play,’ said Mr Irwine, smiling. But when he saw Arthur colour, he went on relentingly, ‘My part, you know, is always that of the old Fogy[11] who sees nothing to admire in the young folks. I don’t like to admit that I’m proud of my pupil when he does graceful things. But I must play the amiable old gentleman for once, and second your toast in honour of Adam. Has your grandfather yielded on the other point too, and agreed to have a respectable man as steward?’

‘Oh, no,’ said Arthur, rising from his chair with an air of impatience, and walking along the room with his hands in his pockets. ‘He’s got some project or other about letting the Chase Farm, and bargaining for a supply of milk and butter for the house. But I ask no questions about it — it makes me too angry. I believe he means to do all the business himself, and have nothing in the shape of a steward. It’s amazing what energy he has, though.’

‘Well, we’ll go to the ladies now,’ said Mr Irwine, rising too. ‘I want to tell my mother what a splendid throne you’ve prepared for her under the marquee.’

‘Yes, and we must be going to luncheon too,’ said Arthur. ‘It must be two o’clock, for there is the gong beginning to sound for the tenants’ dinners.’

CHAPTER XXIII

Dinner-Time

When Adam heard that he was to dine up-stairs with the large tenants, he felt rather uncomfortable at the idea of being exalted in this way above his mother and Seth, who were to dine in the cloisters below. But Mr Mills, the butler, assured him that Captain Donnithorne had given particular orders about it, and would be very angry if Adam was not there.

Adam nodded, and went up to Seth, who was standing a few yards off. 'Seth, lad,' he said, 'the Captain has sent to say I'm to dine up-stairs — he wishes it particular, Mr Mills says, so I suppose it 'ud be behaving ill for me not to go. But I don't like sitting up above thee and mother, as if I was better than my own flesh and blood. Thee't not take it unkind, I hope?'

'Nay, nay, lad,' said Seth, 'thy honour's our honour; and if thee get'st respect, thee'st won it by thy own deserts. The further I see thee above me, the better, so long as thee feel'st like a brother to me. It's because o' thy being appointed over the woods, and it's nothing but what's right. That's a place o' trust, and Thee't above a common workman now.'

'Ay,' said Adam, 'but nobody knows a word about it yet. I haven't given notice to Mr Bürge about leaving him, and I don't like to tell anybody else about it before he knows, for he'll be a good bit hurt, I doubt. People 'ull be wondering to see me there, and they'll like enough be guessing the reason, and asking questions, for there's been so much talk up and down about my having the place, this last three weeks.'

'Well, thee canst say thee wast ordered to come without being told the reason. That's the truth. And mother 'ull be fine and joyful about it. Let's go and tell her.'

Adam was not the only guest invited to come up-stairs on other grounds than the amount he contributed to the rent-roll. There were other people in the two parishes who derived dignity from their functions rather than from their pocket, and of these Bartle Massey was one. His lame walk was rather slower than usual on this warm day, so Adam lingered behind when the bell rang for dinner, that he might walk up with his old friend; for he was a little too shy to join the Poyser party on this public occasion. Opportunities of getting to Hetty's side would be sure to turn up in the course of the day, and Adam contented himself with that, for he disliked any risk of being 'joked' about Hetty; — the big, outspoken, fearless man was very shy and diffident as to his love-making.

'Well, Mester Massey,' said Adam, as Bartle came up, 'I'm going to dine up-stairs with you to-day: the Captain's sent me orders.'

'Ah!' said Bartle, pausing, with one hand on his back. 'Then there's something in the wind — there's something in the wind. Have you heard anything about what the old Squire means to do?'

'Why, yes,' said Adam; 'I'll tell you what I know, because I believe you can keep a still tongue in your head if you like; and I hope you'll not let drop a word till it's common talk, for I've particular reasons against its being known.'

'Trust to me, my boy, trust to me. I've got no wife to worm it out of me and then run out and cackle it in everybody's hearing. If you trust a man, let him be a bachelor — let him be a bachelor.'

'Well, then, it was so far settled yesterday, that I'm to take the management o' the woods. The Captain sent for me, t' offer it me, when I was seeing to the poles and things here, and I've agreed to't. But if anybody asks any questions up-stairs, just you take no notice, and turn the talk to something else, and I'll be obliged to you. Now, let us go on, for we're pretty nigh the last, I think.'

'I know what to do, never fear,' said Bartle, moving on. 'The news will be good sauce to my dinner. Ay, ay, my boy, you'll get on. I'll back you for an eye at measuring, and a head-piece for figures, against any man in this county; and you've had good teaching — you've had good teaching.'

When they got up-stairs, the question which Arthur had left unsettled, as to who was to be president, and who vice, was still under discussion, so that Adam's entrance passed without remark.

'It stands to sense,' Mr Casson was saying, 'as old Mr Poyser, as is th' oldest man i' the room, should sit at top o' the table. I wasn't butler fifteen year without learning the rights and the wrongs about dinner.'

'Nay, nay,' said old Martin, 'I'n gi'en up to my son; I'm no tenant now; let my son take my place. Th' ould folks ha' had their turn: they mun make way for the young uns.'

‘I should ha’ thought the biggest tenant had the best right, more nor th’ oldest,’ said Luke Britton, who was not fond of the critical Mr Poyser; ‘there’s Mester Holdsworth has more land nor anybody else on th’ estate.’

‘Well,’ said Mr Poyser, ‘suppose we say th’ man wi’ the foulest land shall sit at top; then whoever gets th’ honour, there’ll be no envying on him.’

‘Eh, here’s Mester Massey,’ said Mr Craig, who, being a neutral in the dispute, had no interest but in conciliation; ‘the schoolmaster ought to be able to tell you what’s right. Who’s to sit at top o’ the table, Mr Massey?’

‘Why, the broadest man,’ said Bartle; ‘and then he won’t take up other folks’ room; and the next broadest must sit at bottom.’

This happy mode of settling the dispute produced much laughter — a smaller joke would have sufficed for that. Mr Casson, however, did not feel it compatible with his dignity and superior knowledge to join in the laugh, until it turned out that he was fixed on as the second broadest man. Martin Poyser, the younger, as the broadest, was to be president, and Mr Casson, as next broadest, was to be vice.

Owing to this arrangement, Adam, being, of course, at the bottom of the table, fell under the immediate observation of Mr Casson, who, too much occupied with the question of precedence, had not hitherto noticed his entrance. Mr Casson, we have seen, considered Adam ‘rather lifted up and pepperylike’: he thought the gentry made more fuss about this young carpenter than was necessary; they made no fuss about Mr Casson, although he had been an excellent butler for fifteen years.

‘Well, Mr Bede, you’re one o’ them as mounts hup’ards apace,’ he said, when Adam sat down. ‘You’ve niver dined here before, as I remember.’

‘No, Mr Casson,’ said Adam, in his strong voice, that could be heard along the table; ‘I’ve never dined here before, but I come by Captain Donnithorne’s wish, and I hope it’s not disagreeable to anybody here.’

‘Nay, nay,’ said several voices at once, ‘we’re glad ye’re come. Who’s got anything to say again’ it?’

‘And ye’ll sing us, “Over the hills and far away”,[1] after dinner, wonna ye?’ said Mr Chowne. ‘That’s a song I’m uncommon fond on.’

‘Peeh!’ said Mr Craig; ‘it’s not to be named by side o’ the Scotch tunes. I’ve never cared about singing myself; I’ve had something better to do. A man that’s got the names and the nature o’ plants in’s head isna likely to keep a hollow place t’ hold tunes in. But a second cousin o’ mine, a drovier, was a rare hand at remembering the Scotch tunes. He’d got nothing else to think on.’

‘The Scotch tunes!’ said Bartle Massey, contemptuously; ‘I’ve heard enough o’ the Scotch tunes to last me while I live. They’re fit for nothing but to frighten the birds with — that’s to say, the English birds, for the Scotch birds may sing Scotch for what I know. Give the lads a bagpipes instead of a rattle, and I’ll answer for it the corn ’11 be safe.’[2]

‘Yes, there’s folks as find a pleasure in undervaluing what they know but little about,’ said Mr Craig.

‘Why, the Scotch tunes are just like a scolding, nagging woman,’ Bartle went on, without deigning to notice Mr Craig’s remark. ‘They go on with the same thing over and over again, and never come to a reasonable end. Anybody ’ud think the Scotch tunes had always been asking a question of somebody as deaf as old Taft, and had never got an answer yet.’

Adam minded the less about sitting by Mr Casson, because this position enabled him to see Hetty, who was not far off him at the next table. Hetty, however, had not even noticed his presence yet, for she was giving angry attention to Totty, who insisted on drawing up her feet on to the bench in antique fashion, and thereby threatened to make dusty marks on Hetty’s pink-and-white frock. No sooner were the little fat legs pushed down than up they came again, for Totty’s eyes were too busy in staring at the large dishes to see where the plum-pudding was, for her to retain any consciousness of her legs. Hetty got quite out of patience, and at last, with a frown and pout, and gathering tears, she said –

‘Oh dear, aunt, I wish you’d speak to Totty; she keeps putting her legs up so, and messing my frock.’

‘What’s the matter wi’ the child? She can niver please you,’ said the mother. ‘Let her come by the side o’ me, then: *I* can put up wi’ her.’

Adam was looking at Hetty, and saw the frown and pout, and the dark eyes seeming to grow larger with pettish half-gathered tears. Quiet Mary Bürge, who sat near enough to see that Hetty was cross, and that Adam’s eyes were fixed on her, thought that so sensible a man as Adam must be reflecting on the small value of beauty in a woman whose temper was bad. Mary was a good girl, not given to indulge in evil feelings, but she said to herself, that, since Hetty had a bad temper, it was better Adam should know it. And it was quite true, that if Hetty had been plain she would have looked very ugly and unamiable at that moment, and no one’s moral judgment upon her would have been in the least beguiled. But really there was something quite charming in her pettishness: it looked so much more like innocent distress than ill-humour;

and the severe Adam felt no movement of disapprobation; he only felt a sort of amused pity, as if he had seen a kitten setting up its back, or a little bird with its feathers ruffled. He could not gather what was vexing her, but it was impossible to him to feel otherwise than that she was the prettiest thing in the world, and that if he could have his way, nothing should ever vex her any more. And presently, when Totty was gone, she caught his eye, and her face broke into one of its brightest smiles, as she nodded to him. It was a bit of flirtation: she knew Mary Bürge was looking at them. But the smile was like wine to Adam.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Health-Drinking

When the dinner was over, and the first draughts from the great cask of birthday ale were brought up, room was made for the broad Mr Poyser at the side of the table, and two chairs were placed at the head. It had been settled very definitely what Mr Poyser was to do when the young Squire should appear, and for the last five minutes he had been in a state of abstraction, with his eyes fixed on the dark picture opposite, and his hands busy with the loose cash and other articles in his breeches-pockets.

When the young Squire entered, with Mr Irwine by his side, every one stood up, and this moment of homage was very agreeable to Arthur. He liked to feel his own importance, and besides that, he cared a great deal for the goodwill of these people: he was fond of thinking that they had a hearty, special regard for him. The pleasure he felt was in his face as he said –

'My grandfather and I hope all our friends here have enjoyed their dinner, and find my birthday ale good. Mr Irwine and I are come to taste it with you, and I am sure we shall all like anything the better that the Rector shares with us.'

All eyes were now turned on Mr Poyser, who, with his hands still busy in his pockets, began with the deliberateness of a slow-striking clock. 'Captain, my neighbours have put it upo' me to speak for 'em to-day, for where folks think pretty much alike, one spokesman's as good as a score. And though we've mayhappen got contrairy ways o' thinking about a many things — one man lays down his land one way, an' another another – an' I'll not take it upon me to speak to no man's farming, but my own — this I'll say, as we're all o' one mind about our young Squire. We've pretty nigh all on us known you when you war a little un, an' we've niver known anything on you but what was good an' honourable. You speak fair an' y' act fair, an' we're joyful when we look forrard to your being our landlord, for we b'lieve you mean to do right by everybody, an' 'ull make no man's bread bitter to him if you can help it. That's what I mean, an' that's what we all mean; and when a man's said what he means, he'd better stop, for th' ale 'ull be none the better for stannin'. An' I'll not say how we like th' ale yet, for we couldna well taste it till we'd drunk your health in it; but the dinner was good, an' if there's anybody hasna enjoyed it, it must be the fault of his own inside. An' as for the Rector's company, it's well known as that's welcome t' all the parish wherever he may be; an' I hope, an' we all hope, as he'll live to see us old folks, an' our children grown to men an' women, an' your honour a family man. I've no more to say as concerns the present time, an' so we'll drink our young Squire's health — three times three.'

Hereupon a glorious shouting, a rapping, a jingling, a clattering, and a shouting, with plentiful *da capo,*[1] pleasanter than a strain of sublimest music in the ears that receive such a tribute for the first time. Arthur had felt a twinge of conscience during Mr Poyser's speech, but it was too feeble to nullify the pleasure he felt in being praised. Did he not deserve what was said of him on the whole? If there was something in his conduct that Poyser wouldn't have liked if he had known it, why, no man's conduct will bear too close an inspection; and Poyser was not likely to know it; and, after all, what had he done? Gone a little too far, perhaps, in flirtation, but another man in his place would have acted much worse; and no harm could come — no harm *should* come, for the next time he was alone with Hetty, he would explain to her that she must not think seriously of him or of what had passed. It was necessary to Arthur, you perceive, to be satisfied with himself: uncomfortable thoughts must be got rid of by good intentions for the future, which can be formed so rapidly, that he had time to be uncomfortable and to become easy again before Mr Poyser's slow speech was finished, and when it was time for him to speak he was quite light-hearted.

'I thank you all, my good friends and neighbours,' Arthur said, 'for the good opinion of me, and the kind feelings towards me which Mr Poyser has been expressing on your behalf and on his own, and it will always be my heartiest wish to deserve them. In the course of things we may expect that, if I live, I shall one day or other be your landlord; indeed it is on the ground of that expectation that my grandfather has wished me to celebrate this day and to come among you now; and I look forward to this position, not merely as one of power and pleasure for myself, but as a means of benefiting my neighbours. It hardly becomes so young a man as I am, to talk much about farming to you, who are most of you so much older, and are men of experience; still, I have interested myself a good deal in such matters, and learned as much about them as

my opportunities have allowed; and when the course of events shall place the estate in my hands, it will be my first desire to afford my tenants all the encouragement a landlord can give them, in improving their land, and trying to bring about a better practice of husbandry. It will be my wish to be looked on by all my deserving tenants as their best friend, and nothing would make me so happy as to be able to respect every man on the estate, and to be respected by him in return. It is not my place at present to enter into particulars; I only meet your good hopes concerning me by telling you that my own hopes correspond to them — that what you expect from me I desire to fulfil; and I am quite of Mr Poyser's opinion, that when a man has said what he means, he had better stop. But the pleasure I feel in having my own health drunk by you would not be perfect if we did not drink the health of my grandfather, who has filled the place of both parents to me. I will say no more, until you have joined me in drinking his health on a day when he has wished me to appear among you as the future representative of his name and family.'

Perhaps there was no one present except Mr Irwine who thoroughly understood and approved Arthur's graceful mode of proposing his grandfather's health. The farmers thought the young Squire knew well enough that they hated the old Squire, and Mrs Poyser said, 'he'd better not ha' stirred a kettle o' sour broth'. The bucolic mind does not readily apprehend the refinements of good taste. But the toast could not be rejected, and when it had been drunk, Arthur said –

'I thank you, both for my grandfather and myself; and now there is one more thing I wish to tell you, that you may share my pleasure about it, as I hope and believe you will. I think there can be no man here who has not a respect, and some of you, I am sure, have a very high regard, for my friend Adam Bede. It is well known to every one in this neighbourhood that there is no man whose word can be more depended on than his; that whatever he undertakes to do, he does well, and is as careful for the interests of those who employ him as for his own. I'm proud to say that I was very fond of Adam when I was a little boy, and I have never lost my old feeling for him – I think that shows that I know a good fellow when I find him. It has long been my wish that he should have the management of the woods on the estate, which happen to be very valuable; not only because I think so highly of his character, but because he has the knowledge and the skill which fit him for the place. And I am happy to tell you that it is my grandfather's wish too, and it is now settled that Adam shall manage the woods — a change which I am sure will be very much for the advantage of the estate; and I hope you will by-and-by join me in drinking his health, and in wishing him all the prosperity in life that he deserves. But there is a still older friend of mine than Adam Bede present, and I need not tell you that it is Mr Irwine. I'm sure you will agree with me that we must drink no other person's health until we have drunk his. I know you have all reason to love him, but no one of his parishioners has so much reason as I. Come, charge your glasses, and let us drink to our excellent Rector — three times three!'

This toast was drunk with all the enthusiasm that was wanting to the last, and it certainly was the most picturesque moment in the scene when Mr Irwine got up to speak, and all the faces in the room were turned towards him. The superior refinement of his face was much more striking than that of Arthur's when seen in comparison with the people round them. Arthur's was a much commoner British face, and the splendour of his new-fashioned clothes was more akin to the young farmer's taste in costume than Mr Irwine's powder, and the well-brushed but well-worn black, which seemed to be his chosen suit for great occasions; for he had the mysterious secret of never wearing a new-looking coat.

'This is not the first time, by a great many,' he said, 'that I have had to thank my parishioners for giving me tokens of their goodwill, but neighbourly kindness is among those things that are the more precious the older they get. Indeed, our pleasant meeting to-day is a proof that when what is good comes of age and is likely to live, there is reason for rejoicing, and the relation between us as clergyman and parishioners came of age two years ago, for it is three-and-twenty years since I first came among you, and I see some tall fine-looking young men here, as well as some blooming young women, that were far from looking as pleasantly at me when I christened them, as I am happy to see them looking now. But I'm sure you will not wonder when I say, that among all those young men, the one in whom I have the strongest interest is my friend Mr Arthur Donnithorne, for whom you have just expressed your regard. I had the pleasure of being his tutor for several years, and have naturally had opportunities of knowing him intimately which cannot have occurred to any one else who is present; and I have some pride as well as pleasure in assuring you that I share your high hopes concerning him, and your confidence in his possession of those qualities which will make him an excellent landlord when the time shall come for him to take that important position among you. We feel alike on most matters on which a man who is getting towards fifty can feel in common with a young man of one-and-twenty, and he has just been expressing a feeling which I share very heartily, and I would not willingly omit the opportunity of saying so. That feeling is his value and respect for Adam Bede. People in a high station are of course more thought of and talked about, and have their virtues more praised, than those whose lives are passed in humble everyday work; but every sensible man knows how necessary that

humble everyday work is, and how important it is to us that it should be done well. And I agree with my friend Mr Arthur Donnithorne in feeling that when a man whose duty lies in that sort of work shows a character which would make him an example in any station, his merit should be acknowledged. He is one of those to whom honour is due, and his friends should delight to honour him. I know Adam Bede well — I know what he is as a workman, and what he has been as a son and brother — and I am saying the simplest truth when I say that I respect him as much as I respect any man living. But I am not speaking to you about a stranger; some of you are his intimate friends, and I believe there is not one here who does not know enough of him to join heartily in drinking his health.'

As Mr Irwine paused, Arthur jumped up, and, filling his glass, said, 'A bumper to Adam Bede, and may he live to have sons as faithful and clever as himself!'

No hearer, not even Bartle Massey, was so delighted with this toast as Mr Poyser: 'tough work' as his first speech had been, he would have started up to make another if he had not known the extreme irregularity of such a course. As it was, he found as outlet for his feeling in drinking his ale unusually fast, and setting down his glass with a swing of his arm, and a determined rap. If Jonathan Bürge and a few others felt less comfortable on the occasion, they tried their best to look contented, and so the toast was drunk with a goodwill apparently unanimous.

Adam was rather paler than usual when he got up to thank his friends. He was a good deal moved by this public tribute – very naturally, for he was in the presence of all his little world, and it was uniting to do him honour. But he felt no shyness about speaking, not being troubled with small vanity or lack of words; he looked neither awkward nor embarrassed, but stood in his usual firm upright attitude, with his head thrown a little backward and his hands perfectly still, in that rough dignity which is peculiar to intelligent, honest, well-built workmen, who are never wondering what is their business in the world.

'I'm quite taken by surprise,' he said. 'I didn't expect anything o' this sort, for it's a good deal more than my wages. But I've the more reason to be grateful to you, Captain, and to you, Mr Irwine, and to all my friends here, who've drunk my health and wished me well. It 'ud be nonsense for me to be saying, I don't at all deserve th' opinion you have of me; that 'ud be poor thanks to you, to say that you've known me all these years, and yet haven't sense enough to find out a great deal o' the truth about me. You think, if I undertake to do a bit o' work, I'll do it well, be my pay big or little — and that's true. I'd be ashamed to stand before you here if it wasna true. But it seems to me, that's a man's plain duty, and nothing to be conceited about, and it's pretty clear to me as I've never done more than my duty; for let us do what we will, it's only making use o' the sperrit and the powers that ha' been given to us. And so this kindness o' yours, I'm sure, is no debt you owe me, but a free gift, and as such I accept it and am thankful. And as to this new employment I've taken in hand, I'll only say that I took it at Captain Donnithorne's desire, and that I'll try to fulfil his expectations. I'd wish for no better lot than to work under him, and to know that while I was getting my own bread I was taking care of his int'rests. For I believe he's one o' those gentlemen as wishes to do the right thing, and to leave the world a bit better than he found it, which it's my belief every man may do, whether he's gentle or simple, whether he sets a good bit o' work going and finds the money, or whether he does the work with his own hands. There's no occasion for me to say any more about what I feel towards him: I hope to show it through the rest o' my life in my actions.'

There were various opinions about Adam's speech: some of the women whispered that he didn't show himself thankful enough, and seemed to speak as proud as could be; but most of the men were of opinion that nobody could speak more straightfor'ard, and that Adam was as fine a chap as need to be. While such observations were being buzzed about, mingled with wonderings as to what the old Squire meant to do for a bailiff, and whether he was going to have a steward,[2] the two gentlemen had risen, and were walking round to the table where the wives and children sat. There was none of the strong ale here, of course, but wine and dessert — sparkling gooseberry for the young ones, and some good sherry for the mothers. Mrs Poyser was at the head of this table, and Totty was now seated in her lap, bending her small nose deep down into a wine-glass in search of the nuts floating there.

'How do you do, Mrs Poyser?' said Arthur. 'Weren't you pleased to hear your husband make such a good speech to-day?'

'Oh, sir, the men are mostly so tongue-tied — you're forced partly to guess what they mean, as you do wi' the dumb creaturs.'

'What! you think you could have made it better for him?' said Mr Irwine, laughing.

'Well, sir, when I want to say anything, I can mostly find words to say it in, thank God. Not as I'm a-finding faut wi' my husband, for if he's a man o' few words, what he says he'll stand to.'

'I'm sure I never saw a prettier party than this,' Arthur said, looking round at the apple-cheeked children. 'My aunt and the Miss Irwines will come up and see you presently. They were afraid of the noise of the

toasts, but it would be a shame for them not to see you at table.'

He walked on, speaking to the mothers and patting the children, while Mr Irwine satisfied himself with standing still, and nodding at a distance, that no one's attention might be disturbed from the young Squire, the hero of the day. Arthur did not venture to stop near Hetty, but merely bowed to her as he passed along the opposite side. The foolish child felt her heart swelling with discontent; for what woman was ever satisfied with apparent neglect, even when she knows it to be the mask of love? Hetty thought this was going to be the most miserable day she had had for a long while; a moment of chill daylight and reality came across her dream: Arthur, who had seemed so near to her only a few hours before, was separated from her, as the hero of a great procession is separated from a small outsider in the crowd.

CHAPTER XXV

The Games

The great dance was not to begin until eight o'clock; but for any lads and lasses who liked to dance on the shady grass before then, there was music always at hand; for was not the band of the Benefit Club capable of playing excellent jigs, reels, and hornpipes?[1] And, besides this, there was a grand band hired from Rosseter, who, with their wonderful wind-instruments and puffed-out cheeks, were themselves a delightful show to the small boys and girls. To say nothing of Joshua Rann's fiddle, which, by an act of generous forethought, he had provided himself with, in case any one should be of sufficiently pure taste to prefer dancing to a solo on that instrument.

Meantime, when the sun had moved off the great open space in front of the house, the games began. There were of course well-soaped poles to be climbed by the boys and youths, races to be run by the old women, races to be run in sacks, heavy weights to be lifted by the strong men, and a long list of challenges to such ambitious attempts as that of walking as many yards as possible on one leg — feats in which it was generally remarked that Wiry Ben, being 'the lissom'st, springest fellow i' the country', was sure to be pre-eminent. To crown all, there was to be a donkey-race — that sublimest of all races, conducted on the grand socialistic idea[2] of everybody encouraging everybody else's donkey, and the sorriest donkey winning.

And soon after four o'clock, splendid old Mrs Irwine, in her damask satin and jewels and black lace, was led out by Arthur, followed by the whole family party, to her raised seat under the striped marquee, where she was to give out the prizes to the victors. Staid, formal Miss Lydia had requested to resign that queenly office to the royal old lady, and Arthur was pleased with this opportunity of gratifying his godmother's taste for stateliness. Old Mr Donnithorne, the delicately-clean, finely-scented, withered old man, led out Miss Irwine, with his air of punctilious, acid politeness; Mr Gawaine brought Miss Lydia, looking neutral and stiff in an elegant peach-blossom silk; and Mr Irwine came last with his pale sister Anne. No other friend of the family, besides Mr Gawaine, was invited to-day; there was to be a grand dinner for the neighbouring gentry on the morrow, but to-day all the forces were required for the entertainment of the tenants.

There was a sunk fence in front of the marquee, dividing the lawn from the park, but a temporary bridge had been made for the passage of the victors, and the groups of people standing, or seated here and there on benches, stretched on each side of the open space from the white marquees up to the sunk fence.

'Upon my word it's a pretty sight,' said the old lady, in her deep voice, when she was seated, and looked round on the bright scene with its dark-green background; 'and it's the last féte-day I'm likely to see, unless you make haste and get married, Arthur. But take care you get a charming bride, else I would rather die without seeing her.'

'You're so terribly fastidious, godmother,' said Arthur, 'I'm afraid I should never satisfy you with my choice.'

'Well, I won't forgive you if she's not handsome. I can't be put off with amiability, which is always the excuse people are making for the existence of plain people. And she must not be silly; that will never do, because you'll want managing, and a silly woman can't manage you. Who is that tall young man, Dauphin, with the mild face? There, standing without his hat, and taking such care of that tall old woman by the side of him — his mother, of course. I like to see that.'

'What, don't you know him, mother?' said Mr Irwine. 'That is Seth Bede, Adam's brother — a Methodist, but a very good fellow. Poor Seth has looked rather down-hearted of late; I thought it was because of his father's dying in that sad way; but Joshua Rann tells me he wanted to marry that sweet little Methodist preacher who was here about a month ago, and I suppose she refused him.'

'Ah, I remember hearing about her: but there are no end of people here that I don't know, for they're grown up and altered so since I used to go about.'

'What excellent sight you have!' said old Mr Donnithorne, who was holding a double glass up to his eyes, 'to see the expression of that young man's face so far off. His face is nothing but a pale blurred spot to me. But I fancy I have the advantage of you when we come to look close. I can read small print without spectacles.'

'Ah, my dear sir, you began with being very near-sighted, and those near-sighted eyes always wear the

best. I want very strong spectacles to read with, but then I think my eyes get better and better for things at a distance. I suppose if I could live another fifty years, I should be blind to everything that wasn't out of other people's sight, like a man who stands in a well, and sees nothing but the stars.'

'See,' said Arthur, 'the old women are ready to set out on their race now. Which do you bet on, Gawaine?'

'The long-legged one, unless they're going to have several heats, and then the little wiry one may win.'

'There are the Poysers, mother, not far off on the right hand,' said Miss Irwine. 'Mrs Poyser is looking at you. Do take notice of her.'

'To be sure I will,' said the old lady, giving a gracious bow to Mrs Poyser. 'A woman who sends me such excellent cream-cheese is not to be neglected. Bless me! what a fat child that is she is holding on her knee! But who is that pretty girl with dark eyes?'

'That is Hetty Sorrel,' said Miss Lydia Donnithorne, 'Martin Poyser's niece — a very likely young person, and well-looking too. My maid has taught her fine needle-work, and she has mended some lace of mine very respectably indeed — very respectably.'

'Why, she has lived with the Poysers six or seven years, mother; you must have seen her,' said Miss Irwine.

'No, I've never seen her, child; at least not as she is now,' said Mrs Irwine, continuing to look at Hetty. 'Well-looking, indeed! She's a perfect beauty! I've never seen anything so pretty since my young days. What a pity such beauty as that should be thrown away among the farmers, when it's wanted so terribly among the good families without fortune! I daresay, now, she'll marry a man who would have thought her just as pretty if she had had round eyes and red hair.'

Arthur dared not turn his eyes towards Hetty while Mrs Irwine was speaking of her. He feigned not to hear, and to be occupied with something on the opposite side. But he saw her plainly enough without looking; saw her in heightened beauty, because he heard her beauty praised — for other men's opinion, you know, was like a native climate to Arthur's feelings: it was the air on which they thrived the best, and grew strong. Yes! she *was* enough to turn any man's head: any man in his place would have done and felt the same. And to give her up after all, as he was determined to do, would be an act that he should always look back upon with pride.

'No, mother,' said Mr Irwine, replying to her last words; 'I can't agree with you there. The common people are not quite so stupid as you imagine. The commonest man, who has his ounce of sense and feeling, is conscious of the difference between a lovely, delicate woman, and a coarse one. Even a dog feels a difference in their presence. The man may be no better able than the dog to explain the influence the more refined beauty has on him, but he feels it.'

'Bless me, Dauphin, what does an old bachelor like you know about it?'

'Oh, that is one of the matters in which old bachelors are wiser than married men, because they have time for more general contemplation. Your fine critic of women must never shackle his judgment by calling one woman his own. But, as an example of what I was saying, that pretty Methodist preacher I mentioned just now, told me that she had preached to the roughest miners, and had never been treated with anything but the utmost respect and kindness by them. The reason is – though she doesn't know it — that there's so much tenderness, refinement, and purity about her. Such a woman as that brings with her "airs from heaven"[3] that the coarsest fellow is not insensible to.'

'Here's a delicate bit of womanhood, or girlhood, coming to receive a prize, I suppose,' said Mr Gawaine. 'She must be one of the racers in the sacks, who had set off before we came.'

The 'bit of womanhood' was our old acquaintance Bessy Cranage, otherwise Chad's Bess, whose large red cheeks and blowsy person had undergone an exaggeration of colour, which, if she had happened to be a heavenly body, would have made her sublime. Bessy, I am sorry to say, had taken to her earrings again since Dinah's departure, and was otherwise decked out in such small finery as she could muster. Any one who could have looked into poor Bessy's heart would have seen a striking resemblance between her little hopes and anxieties and Hetty's. The advantage, perhaps, would have been on Bessy's side in the matter of feeling. But then, you see, they were so very different outside! You would have been inclined to box Bessy's ears, and you would have longed to kiss Hetty.

Bessy had been tempted to run the arduous race, partly from mere hoidenish gaiety, partly because of the prize. Some one had said there were to be cloaks and other nice clothes for prizes, and she approached the marquee, fanning herself with her handkerchief, but with exultation sparkling in her round eyes.

'Here is the prize for the first sack-race,' said Miss Lydia, taking a large parcel from the table where the prizes were laid, and giving it to Mrs Irwine before Bessy came up; 'an excellent grogram gown and a piece of flannel.'[4]

'You didn't think the winner was to be so young, I suppose, aunt?' said Arthur. 'Couldn't you find

something else for this girl, and save that grim-looking gown for one of the older women?'

'I have bought nothing but what is useful and substantial,' said Miss Lydia, adjusting her own lace; 'I should not think of encouraging a love of finery in young women of that class. I have a scarlet cloak, but that is for the old woman who wins.'

This speech of Miss Lydia's produced rather a mocking expression in Mrs Irwine's face as she looked at Arthur, while Bessy came up and dropped a series of curtsies.

'This is Bessy Cranage, mother,' said Mr Irwine, kindly, 'Chad Cranage's daughter. You remember Chad Cranage, the blacksmith?'

'Yes, to be sure,' said Mrs Irwine. 'Well, Bessy, here is your prize — excellent warm things for winter. I'm sure you have had hard work to win them this warm day.'

Bessy's lip fell as she saw the ugly, heavy gown, — which felt so hot and disagreeable, too, on this July day, and was such a great ugly thing to carry. She dropped her curtsies again, without looking up, and with a growing tremulousness about the corners of her mouth, and then turned away.

'Poor girl,' said Arthur; 'I think she's disappointed. I wish it had been something more to her taste.'

'She's a bold-looking young person,' observed Miss Lydia. 'Not at all one I should like to encourage.'

Arthur silently resolved that he would make Bessy a present of money before the day was over, that she might buy something more to her mind; but she, not aware of the consolation in store for her, turned out of the open space, where she was visible from the marquee, and throwing down the odious bundle under a tree, began to cry — very much tittered at the while by the small boys. In this situation she was descried by her discreet matronly cousin, who lost no time in coming up, having just given the baby into her husband's charge.

'What's the matter wi' ye?' said Bess the matron, taking up the bundle and examining it. 'Ye'n sweltered yoursen, I reckon, running that fool's race. An' here, they'n gi'en you lots o' good grogram and flannel, as should ha' been gi'en by good rights to them as had the sense to keep away from such foolery. Ye might spare me a bit o' this grogram to make clothes for the lad — ye war Ne'er ill-natured, Bess; I Ne'er said that on ye.'

'Ye may take it all, for what I care,' said Bess the maiden with a pettish movement, beginning to wipe away her tears and recover herself.

'Well, I could do wi't, if so be ye want to get rid on't,' said the disinterested cousin, walking quickly away with the bundle, lest Chad's Bess should change her mind.

But that bonny-cheeked lass was blest with an elasticity of spirits that secured her from any rankling grief; and by the time the grand climax of the donkey-race came on, her disappointment was entirely lost in the delightful excitement of attempting to stimulate the last donkey by hisses, while the boys applied the argument of sticks. But the strength of the donkey mind lies in adopting a course inversely as the arguments urged, which, well considered, requires as great a mental force as the direct sequence; and the present donkey proved the first-rate order of his intelligence by coming to a dead stand-still just when the blows were thickest. Great was the shouting of the crowd, radiant the grinning of Bill Downes the stone-sawyer and the fortunate rider of this superior beast, which stood calm and stiff-legged in the midst of its triumph.

Arthur himself had provided the prizes for the men, and Bill was made happy with a splendid pocket-knife, supplied with blades and gimlets enough to make a man at home on a desert island. He had hardly returned from the marquee with the prize in his hand, when it began to be understood that Wiry Ben proposed to amuse the company, before the gentry went to dinner, with an impromptu and gratuitous performance – namely, a hornpipe, the main idea of which was doubtless borrowed; but this was to be developed by the dancer in so peculiar and complex a manner that no one could deny him the praise of originality. Wiry Ben's pride in his dancing — an accomplishment productive of great effect at the yearly Wake[5] — had needed only slightly elevating by an extra quantity of good ale, to convince him that the gentry would be very much struck with his performance of the hornpipe; and he had been decidedly encouraged in this idea by Joshua Rann, who observed that it was nothing but right to do something to please the young Squire, in return for what he had done for them. You will be the less surprised at this opinion in so grave a personage when you learn that Ben had requested Mr Rann to accompany him on the fiddle, and Joshua felt quite sure that though there might not be much in the dancing, the music would make up for it. Adam Bede, who was present in one of the large marquees, where the plan was being discussed, told Ben he had better not make a fool of himself — a remark which at once fixed Ben's determination: he was not going to let anything alone because Adam Bede turned up his nose at it.

'What's this, what's this?' said old Mr Donnithorne. 'Is it something you've arranged, Arthur? Here's the clerk coming with his fiddle, and a smart fellow with a nosegay in his button-hole.'

'No,' said Arthur; 'I know nothing about it. By Jove, he's going to dance! It's one of the carpenters — I

forget his name at this moment.'

'It's Ben Cranage — wiry Ben, they call him,' said Mr Irwine; 'rather a loose fish, I think. Anne, my dear, I see that fiddle-scraping is too much for you: you're getting tired. Let me take you in now, that you may rest till dinner.'

Miss Anne rose assentingly, and the good brother took her away, while Joshua's preliminary scrapings burst into the 'White Cockade',[6] from which he intended to pass to a variety of tunes, by a series of transitions which his good ear really taught him to execute with some skill. It would have been an exasperating fact to him, if he had known it, that the general attention was too thoroughly absorbed by Ben's dancing for any one to give much heed to the music.

Have you ever seen a real English rustic perform a solo dance? Perhaps you have only seen a ballet rustic, smiling like a merry countryman in crockery, with graceful turns of the haunch and insinuating movements of the head. That is as much like the real thing as the 'Bird Waltz'[7] is like the song of birds. Wiry Ben never smiled: he looked as serious as a dancing monkey — as serious as if he had been an experimental philosopher ascertaining in his own person the amount of shaking and the varieties of angularity that could be given to the human limbs.

To make amends for the abundant laughter in the striped marquee, Arthur clapped his hands continually and cried 'Bravo!' But Ben had one admirer whose eyes followed his movements with a fervid gravity that equalled his own. It was Martin Poyser, who was seated on a bench, with Tommy between his legs.

'What dost think o' that?' he said to his wife. 'He goes as pat to the music as if he was made o' clockwork. I used to be a pretty good un at dancing myself when I was lighter, but I could niver ha' hit it just to th' hair like that.'

'It's little matter what his limbs are, to my thinking,' returned Mrs Poyser. 'He's empty enough i' the upper story, or he'd niver come jigging an' stamping i' that way, like a mad grasshopper, for the gentry to look at him. They're fit to die wi' laughing, I can see.'

'Well, well, so much the better, it amuses 'em,' said Mr Poyser, who did not easily take an irritable view of things. 'But they're going away now, t' have their dinner, I reckon. We'll move about a bit, shall we? and see what Adam Bede's doing. He's got to look after the drinking and things: I doubt he hasna had much fun.'

CHAPTER XXVI

The Dance

Arthur had chosen the entrance-hall for the ball-room: very wisely, for no other room could have been so airy, or would have had the advantage of the wide doors opening into the garden, as well as a ready entrance into the other rooms. To be sure, a stone floor was not the pleasantest to dance on, but then, most of the dancers had known what it was to enjoy a Christmas dance on kitchen quarries. It was one of those entrance-halls which make the surrounding rooms look like closets — with stucco angels, trumpets, and flower wreaths on the lofty ceiling, and great medallions of miscellaneous heroes on the walls, alternating with statues in niches. Just the sort of place to be ornamented well with green boughs, and Mr Craig had been proud to show his taste and his hot-house plants on the occasion. The broad steps of the stone staircase were covered with cushions to serve as seats for the children, who were to stay till half-past nine with the servant-maids, to see the dancing; and as this dance was confined to the chief tenants, there was abundant room for every one. The lights were charmingly disposed in coloured-paper lamps, high up among green boughs, and the farmers' wives and daughters, as they peeped in, believed no scene could be more splendid; they knew now quite well in what sort of rooms the king and queen lived, and their thoughts glanced with some pity towards cousins and acquaintances who had not this fine opportunity of knowing how things went on in the great world. The lamps were already lit, though the sun had not long set, and there was that calm light out of doors in which we seem to see all objects more distinctly than in the broad day.

It was a pretty scene outside the house: the farmers and their families were moving about the lawn, among the flowers and shrubs, or along the broad straight road leading from the east front, where a carpet of mossy grass spread on each side, studded here and there with a dark flat-boughed cedar, or a grand pyramidal fir sweeping the ground with its branches, all tipped with a fringe of paler green. The groups of cottagers in the park were gradually diminishing, the young ones being attracted towards the lights that were beginning to gleam from the windows of the gallery in the abbey, which was to be their dancing-room, and some of the sober elder ones thinking it time to go home quietly. One of these was Lisbeth Bede, and Seth went with her — not from filial attention only, for his conscience would not let him join in dancing. It had been rather a melancholy day to Seth: Dinah had never been more constantly present with him than in this scene, where everything was so unlike her. He saw her all the more vividly after looking at the thoughtless faces and gay-coloured dresses of the young women — just as one feels the beauty and the greatness of a pictured Madonna the more, when it has been for a moment screened from us by a vulgar head in a bonnet. But this presence of Dinah in his mind only helped him to bear the better with his mother's mood, which had been becoming more and more querulous for the last hour. Poor Lisbeth was suffering from a strange conflict of feelings. Her joy and pride in the honour paid to her darling son Adam was beginning to be worsted in the conflict with the jealousy and fretfulness which had revived when Adam came to tell her that Captain Donnithorne desired him to join the dancers in the hall. Adam was getting more and more out of her reach; she wished all the old troubles back again, for then it mattered more to Adam what his mother said and did.

'Eh, it's fine talkin' o' dancin',' she said, 'an' thy father not a five week in's grave. An' I wish I war there too, istid o' bein' left to take up merrier folks's room above ground.'

'Nay, don't look at it i' that way, mother,' said Adam, who was determined to be gentle to her to-day. 'I don't mean to dance — I shall only look on. And since the Captain wishes me to be there, it 'ud look as if I thought I knew better than him to say as I'd rather not stay. And thee know'st how he's behaved to me to-day.'

'Eh, Thee't do as thee lik'st, for thy old mother's got no right t' hinder thee. She's nought but th' old husk, and thee'st slipped away from her, like the ripe nut.'

'Well, mother,' said Adam, 'I'll go and tell the Captain as it hurts thy feelings for me to stay, and I'd rather go home upo' that account: he won't take it ill then, I daresay, and I'm willing.' He said this with some effort, for he really longed to be near Hetty this evening.

'Nay, nay, I wonna ha' thee do that — the young Squire 'ull be angered. Go an' do what Thee't ordered to

do, an' me and Seth 'ull go whome. I know it's a grit honour for thee to be so looked on — an' who's to be prouder on it nor thy mother? Hadna she the cumber o' rearin' thee an' doin' for thee all these 'ears?'

'Well, good-bye, then, mother — good-bye, lad — remember Gyp when you get home,' said Adam, turning away towards the gate of the pleasure-grounds, where he hoped he might be able to join the Poysers, for he had been so occupied throughout the afternoon that he had had no time to speak to Hetty. His eye soon detected a distant group, which he knew to be the right one, returning to the house along the broad gravel road, and he hastened on to meet them.

'Why, Adam, I'm glad to get sight on y' again,' said Mr Poyser, who was carrying Totty on his arm. 'You're going t' have a bit o' fun, I hope, now your work's all done. And here's Hetty has promised no end o' partners, an' I've just been askin' her if she'd agreed to dance wi' you, an' she says no.'

'Well, I didn't think o' dancing to-night,' said Adam, already tempted to change his mind, as he looked at Hetty.

'Nonsense!' said Mr Poyser. 'Why, everybody's goin' to dance to-night, all but the old Squire and Mrs Irwine. Mrs Best's been tellin' us as Miss Lyddy and Miss Irwine 'ull dance, an' the young Squire 'ull pick my wife for his first partner, t' open the ball: so she'll be forced to dance, though she's laid by ever sin' the Christmas afore the little un was born. You canna for shame stand still, Adam, an' you a fine young fellow, and can dance as well as anybody.'

'Nay, nay,' said Mrs Poyser, 'it 'ud be unbecomin'. I know the dancin's nonsense; but if you stick at everything because it's nonsense, you wonna go far i' this life. When your broth's ready-made for you, you mun swallow the thickenin', or else let the broth alone.'

'Then if Hetty 'ull dance with me,' said Adam, yielding either to Mrs Poyser's argument or to something else, 'I'll dance whichever dance she's free.'

'I've got no partner for the fourth dance,' said Hetty; 'I'll dance that with you, if you like.'

'Ah,' said Mr Poyser, 'but you mun dance the first dance, Adam, else it'll look partic'ler. There's plenty o' nice partners to pick an' choose from, an' it's hard for the gells when the men stan' by and don't ask 'em.'

Adam felt the justice of Mr Poyser's observation: it would not do for him to dance with no one besides Hetty; and remembering that Jonathan Bürge had some reason to feel hurt to-day, he resolved to ask Miss Mary to dance with him the first dance, if she had no other partner.

'There's the big clock strikin' eight,' said Mr Poyser; 'we must make haste in now, else the Squire and the ladies 'ull be in afore us, an' that wouldna look well.'

When they had entered the hall, and the three children under Molly's charge had been seated on the stairs, the folding-doors of the drawing-room were thrown open, and Arthur entered in his regimentals, leading Mrs Irwine to a carpet-covered dais ornamented with hot-house plants, where she and Miss Anne were to be seated with old Mr Donnithorne, that they might look on at the dancing, like the kings and queens in the plays. Arthur had put on his uniform to please the tenants, he said, who thought as much of his militia dignity as if it had been an elevation to the premiership. He had not the least objection to gratify them in that way: his uniform was very advantageous to his figure.

The old Squire, before sitting down, walked round the hall to greet the tenants and make polite speeches to the wives: he was always polite; but the farmers had found out, after long puzzling, that this polish was one of the signs of hardness. It was observed that he gave his most elaborate civility to Mrs Poyser to-night, inquiring particularly about her health, recommending her to strengthen herself with cold water as he did, and avoid all drugs. Mrs Poyser curtsied and thanked him with great self-command, but when he had passed on, she whispered to her husband, 'I'll lay my life he's brewin' some nasty turn against us. Old Harry doesna wag his tail so for nothin'.' Mr Poyser had no time to answer, for now Arthur came up and said, 'Mrs Poyser, I'm come to request the favour of your hand for the first dance; and, Mr Poyser, you must let me take you to my aunt, for she claims you as her partner.'

The wife's pale cheek flushed with a nervous sense of unwonted honour as Arthur led her to the top of the room; but Mr Poyser, to whom an extra glass had restored his youthful confidence in his good looks and good dancing, walked along with them quite proudly, secretly flattering himself that Miss Lydia had never had a partner in *her* life who could lift her off the ground as he would. In order to balance the honours given to the two parishes, Miss Irwine danced with Luke Britton, the largest Broxton farmer, and Mr Gawaine led out Mrs Britton. Mr Irwine, after seating his sister Anne, had gone to the abbey gallery, as he had agreed with Arthur beforehand, to see how the merriment of the cottagers was prospering. Meanwhile, all the less distinguished couples had taken their places: Hetty was led out by the inevitable Mr Craig, and Mary Bürge by Adam; and now the music struck up, and the glorious country-dance, best of all dances, began.

Pity it was not a boarded floor! Then the rhythmic stamping of the thick shoes would have been better

than any drums. That merry stamping, that gracious nodding of the head, that waving bestowal of the hand — where can we see them now? That simple dancing of well-covered matrons, laying aside for an hour the cares of house and dairy, remembering but not affecting youth, not jealous but proud of the young maidens by their side — that holiday sprightliness of portly husbands paying little compliments to their wives, as if their courting days were come again — those lads and lasses a little confused and awkward with their partners, having nothing to say — it would be a pleasant variety to see all that sometimes, instead of low dresses and large skirts, and scanning glances exploring costumes, and languid men in lackered boots smiling with double meaning.

There was but one thing to mar Martin Poyser's pleasure in this dance: it was, that he was always in close contact with Luke Britton, that slovenly farmer. He thought of throwing a little glazed coldness into his eye in the crossing of hands; but then, as Miss Irwine was opposite to him instead of the offensive Luke, he might freeze the wrong person. So he gave his face up to hilarity, unchilled by moral judgements.

How Hetty's heart beat as Arthur approached her! He had hardly looked at her to-day; now he *must* take her hand. Would he press it? would he look at her? She thought she would cry if he gave her no sign of feeling. Now he was there — he had taken her hand — yes, he was pressing it. Hetty turned pale as she looked up at him for an instant and met his eyes, before the dance carried him away. That pale look came upon Arthur like the beginning of a dull pain, which clung to him, though he must dance and smile and joke all the same. Hetty would look so, when he told her what he had to tell her; and he should never be able to bear it — he should be a fool and give way again. Hetty's look did not really mean so much as he thought: it was only the sign of a struggle between the desire for him to notice her, and the dread lest she should betray the desire to others. But Hetty's face had a language that transcended her feelings. There are faces which nature charges with a meaning and pathos not belonging to the single human soul that flutters beneath them, but speaking the joys and sorrows of foregone generations — eyes that tell of deep love which doubtless has been and is somewhere, but not paired with these eyes — perhaps paired with pale eyes that can say nothing; just as a national language may be instinct with poetry unfelt by the lips that use it. That look of Hetty's oppressed Arthur with a dread which yet had something of a terrible unconfessed delight in it, that she loved him too well. There was a hard task before him, for at that moment he felt he would have given up three years of his youth for the happiness of abandoning himself without remorse to his passion for Hetty.

These were the incongruous thoughts in his mind, as he led Mrs Poyser, who was panting with fatigue, and secretly resolving that neither j udge nor j ury should force her to dance another dance, to take a quiet rest in the dining-room, where supper was laid out for the guests to come and take it as they chose.

'I've desired Hetty to remember as she's got to dance wi' you, sir,' said the good innocent woman; 'for she's so thoughtless, she'd be like enough to go an' engage herself for ivery dance. So I told her not to promise too many.'

'Thank you, Mrs Poyser,' said Arthur, not without a twinge. 'Now, sit down in this comfortable chair, and here is Mills ready to give you what you would like best.'

He hurried away to seek another matronly partner, for due honour must be paid to the married women before he asked any of the young ones; and the country-dances, and the stamping, and the gracious nodding, and the waving of the hands, went on joyously.

At last the time had come for the fourth dance — longed for by the strong, grave Adam, as if he had been a delicate-handed youth of eighteen; for we are all very much alike when we are in our first love; and Adam had hardly ever touched Hetty's hand for more than a transient greeting — had never danced with her but once before. His eyes had followed her eagerly to-night in spite of himself, and had taken in deeper draughts of love. He thought she behaved so prettily, so quietly; she did not seem to be flirting at all, she smiled less than usual; there was almost a sweet sadness about her. 'God bless her!' he said inwardly; 'I'd make her life a happy un, if a strong arm to work for her, and a heart to love her, could do it.'

And then there stole over him delicious thoughts of coming home from work, and drawing Hetty to his side, and feeling her cheek softly pressed against his, till he forgot where he was, and the music and the tread of feet might have been the falling of rain and the roaring of the wind, for what he knew.

But now the third dance was ended, and he might go up to her and claim her hand. She was at the far end of the hall near the staircase, whispering with Molly, who had just given the sleeping Totty into her arms, before running to fetch shawls and bonnets from the landing. Mrs Poyser had taken the two boys away into the dining-room to give them some cake before they went home in the cart with grandfather, and Molly was to follow as fast as possible.

'Let me hold her,' said Adam, as Molly turned up-stairs: 'the children are so heavy when they're asleep.'

Hetty was glad of the relief, for to hold Totty in her arms, standing, was not at all a pleasant variety to

her. But this second transfer had the unfortunate effect of rousing Totty, who was not behind any child of her age in peevishness at an unseasonable awaking. While Hetty was in the act of placing her in Adam's arms, and had not yet withdrawn her own, Totty opened her eyes, and forthwith fought out with her left fist at Adam's arm, and with her right caught at the string of brown beads round Hetty's neck. The locket leaped out from her frock, and the next moment the string was broken, and Hetty, helpless, saw beads and locket scattered wide on the floor.

'My locket, my locket!' she said, in a loud frightened whisper to Adam; 'never mind the beads.'

Adam had already seen where the locket fell, for it had attracted his glance as it leaped out of her frock. It had fallen on the raised wooden dais where the band sat, not on the stone floor; and as Adam picked it up, he saw the glass with the dark and light locks of hair under it. It had fallen that side upwards, so the glass was not broken. He turned it over on his hand, and saw the enamelled gold back.

'It isn't hurt,' he said, as he held it towards Hetty, who was unable to take it because both her hands were occupied with Totty.

'Oh, it doesn't matter, I don't mind about it,' said Hetty, who had been pale and was now red.

'Not matter?' said Adam, gravely. 'You seemed very frightened about it. I'll hold it till you're ready to take it,' he added, quietly closing his hand over it, that she might not think he wanted to look at it again.

By this time Molly had come with bonnet and shawl, and as soon as she had taken Totty, Adam placed the locket in Hetty's hand. She took it with an air of indifference, and put it in her pocket; in her heart vexed and angry with Adam, because he had seen it, but determined now that she would show no more signs of agitation.

'See,' she said, 'they're taking their places to dance; let us go.'

Adam assented silently. A puzzled alarm had taken possession of him. Had Hetty a lover he didn't know of? — for none of her relations, he was sure, would give her a locket like that; and none of her admirers, with whom he was acquainted, was in the position of an accepted lover, as the giver of that locket must be. Adam was lost in the utter impossibility of finding any person for his fears to alight on: he could only feel with a terrible pang that there was something in Hetty's life unknown to him; that while he had been rocking himself in the hope that she would come to love him, she was already loving another. The pleasure of the dance with Hetty was gone; his eyes, when they rested on her, had an uneasy questioning expression in them; he could think of nothing to say to her; and she, too, was out of temper and disinclined to speak. They were both glad when the dance was ended.

Adam was determined to stay no longer; no one wanted him, and no one would notice if he slipped away. As soon as he got out of doors, he began to walk at his habitual rapid pace, hurrying along without knowing why, busy with the painful thought that the memory of this day, so full of honour and promise to him, was poisoned for ever. Suddenly, when he was far on through the Chase, he stopped, startled by a flash of reviving hope. After all, he might be a fool, making a great misery out of a trifle. Hetty, fond of finery as she was, might have bought the thing herself. It looked too expensive for that — it looked like the things on white satin in the great jeweller's shop at Rosseter. But Adam had very imperfect notions of the value of such things, and he thought it could certainly not cost more than a guinea. Perhaps Hetty had had as much as that in Christmas boxes,[1] and there was no knowing but she might have been childish enough to spend it in that way; she was such a young thing, and she couldn't help loving finery! But then, why had she been so frightened about it at first, and changed colour so, and afterwards pretended not to care? Oh, that was because she was ashamed of his seeing that she had such a smart thing — she was conscious that it was wrong for her to spend her money on it, and she knew that Adam disapproved of finery. It was a proof she cared about what he liked and disliked. She must have thought from his silence and gravity afterwards that he was very much displeased with her, that he was inclined to be harsh and severe towards her foibles. And as he walked on more quietly, chewing the cud of this new hope, his only uneasiness was that he had behaved in a way which might chill Hetty's feeling towards him. For this last view of the matter *must* be the true one. How could Hetty have an accepted lover, quite unknown to him? She was never away from her uncle's house for more than a day; she could have no acquaintances that did not come there, and no intimacies unknown to her uncle and aunt. It would be folly to believe that the locket was given to her by a lover. The little ring of dark hair he felt sure was her own; he could form no guess about the light hair under it, for he had not seen it very distinctly. It might be a bit of her father's or mother's, who had died when she was a child, and she would naturally put a bit of her own along with it.

And so Adam went to bed comforted, having woven for himself an ingenious web of probabilities — the surest screen a wise man can place between himself and the truth. His last waking thoughts melted into a dream that he was with Hetty again at the Hall Farm, and that he was asking her to forgive him for being so cold and silent.

And while he was dreaming this, Arthur was leading Hetty to the dance, and saying to her in low hurried tones, ‘I shall be in the wood the day after to-morrow at seven; come as early as you can.’ And Hetty’s foolish joys and hopes, which had flown away for a little space, scared by a mere nothing, now all came fluttering back, unconscious of the real peril. She was happy for the first time this long day, and wished that dance would last for hours. Arthur wished it too; it was the last weakness he meant to indulge in; and a man never lies with more delicious languor under the influence of a passion, than when he has persuaded himself that he shall subdue it tomorrow.

But Mrs Poyser’s wishes were quite the reverse of this, for her mind was filled with dreary forebodings as to the retardation of to-morrow morning’s cheese in consequence of these late hours. Now that Hetty had done her duty and danced one dance with the young Squire, Mr Poyser must go out and see if the cart was come back to fetch them, for it was half-past ten o’clock, and notwithstanding a mild suggestion on his part that it would be bad manners for them to be the first to go, Mrs Poyser was resolute on the point, ‘manners or no manners’.

‘What! going already, Mrs Poyser?’ said old Mr Donnithorne, as she came to curtsy and take leave; ‘I thought we should not part with any of our guests till eleven: Mrs Irwine and I, who are elderly people, think of sitting out the dance till then.’

‘Oh, your honour, it’s all right and proper for gentlefolks to stay up by candle-light — they’ve got no cheese on their minds. We’re late enough as it is, an’ there’s no lettin’ the cows know as they mustn’t want to be milked so early to-morrow mornin’. So, if you’ll please t’ excuse us, we’ll take our leave.’

‘Eh!’ she said to her husband, as they set off in the cart, ‘I’d sooner ha’ brewin’ day and washin’ day together than one o’ these pleasurin’ days. There’s no work so tirin’ as danglin’ about an’ starin’ an’ not rightly knowin’ what you’re goin’ to do next; and keepin’ your face i’ smilin’ order like a grocer o’ market-day for fear people shouldna think you civil enough. An’ you’ve nothing to show for’t when it’s done, if it isn’t a yallow face wi’ eatin’ things as disagree.’

‘Nay, nay,’ said Mr Poyser, who was in his merriest mood, and felt that he had had a great day, ‘a bit o’ pleasuring’s good for thee sometimes. An’ thee danc’st as well as any of ’em, for I’ll back thee against all the wives i’ the parish for a light foot an’ ankle. An’ it was a great honour for the young Squire to ask thee first — I reckon it was because I sat at th’ head o’ the table an’ made the speech. An’ Hetty too — *she* never had such a partner before — a fine young gentleman in reg’mentals. It’ll serve you to talk on, Hetty, when you’re an old woman — how you danced wi’ th’ young Squire the day he come o’ age.’

BOOK FOURTH

CHAPTER XXVII

A Crisis

It was beyond the middle of August — nearly three weeks after the birthday feast. The reaping of the wheat had begun in our north midland county of Loamshire, but the harvest was likely still to be retarded by the heavy rains, which were causing inundations and much damage throughout the country. From this last trouble the Broxton and Hayslope farmers, on their pleasant uplands, and in their brook-watered valleys, had not suffered, and as I cannot pretend that they were such exceptional farmers as to love the general good better than their own, you will infer that they were not in very low spirits about the rapid rise in the price of bread, so long as there was hope of gathering in their own corn undamaged; and occasional days of sunshine and drying winds flattered this hope.

The eighteenth of August was one of these days, when the sunshine looked brighter in all eyes for the gloom that went before. Grand masses of cloud were hurried across the blue, and the great round hills behind the Chase seemed alive with their flying shadows; the sun was hidden for a moment, and then shone out warm again like a recovered joy; the leaves, still green, were tossed off the hedgerow trees by the wind; around the farmhouses there was a sound of clapping doors; the apples fell in the orchards; and the stray horses on the green sides of the lanes and on the common had their manes blown about their faces. And yet the wind seemed only part of the general gladness because the sun was shining. A merry day for the children, who ran and shouted to see if they could top the wind with their voices; and the grown-up people, too, were in good spirits, inclined to believe in yet finer days, when the wind had fallen. If only the corn were not ripe enough to be blown out of the husk and scattered as untimely seed!

And yet a day on which a blighting sorrow may fall upon a man. For if it be true that Nature at certain moments seems charged with a presentiment of one individual lot, must it not also be true that she seems unmindful, unconscious of another? For there is no hour that has not its births of gladness and despair, no morning brightness that does not bring new sickness to desolation as well as new forces to genius and love. There are so many of us, and our lots are so different: what wonder that Nature's mood is often in harsh contrast with the great crisis of our lives? We are children of a large family, and must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of — to be content with little nurture and caressing, and help each other the more.

It was a busy day with Adam, who of late had done almost double work; for he was continuing to act as foreman for Jonathan Bürge, until some satisfactory person could be found to supply his place, and Jonathan was slow to find that person. But he had done the extra work cheerfully, for his hopes were buoyant again about Hetty. Every time she had seen him since the birthday, she had seemed to make an effort to behave all the more kindly to him, that she might make him understand she had forgiven his silence and coldness during the dance. He had never mentioned the locket to her again; too happy that she smiled at him — still happier because he observed in her a more subdued air, something that he interpreted as the growth of womanly tenderness and seriousness. 'Ah!' he thought, again and again, 'she's only seventeen; she'll be thoughtful enough after a while. And her aunt allays says how clever she is at the work. She'll make a wife as mother'll have no occasion to grumble at, after all.' To be sure, he had only seen her at home twice since the birthday; for one Sunday, when he was intending to go from church to the Hall Farm, Hetty had joined the party of upper servants from the Chase, and had gone home with them — almost as if she were inclined to encourage Mr Craig. 'She's takin' too much likin' to them folks i' the housekeeper's room,' Mrs Poyser remarked. 'For my part, I was never overfond o' gentlefolks's servants — they're mostly like the fine ladies' fat dogs, nayther good for barking nor butcher's meat, but On'y for show.' And another evening she was gone to Treddleston to buy some things; though, to his great surprise, as he was returning home, he saw her at a distance getting over a stile quite out of the Treddleston road.

But when he hastened to her, she was very kind, and asked him to go in again when he had taken her to the yard gate. She had gone a little farther into the fields after coming from Treddleston, because she didn't want to go in, she said: it was so nice to be out of doors, and her aunt always made such a fuss about it if she wanted to go out. 'Oh, do come in with me!' she said, as he was going to shake hands with her at the gate, and he could not resist that. So he went in, and Mrs Poyser was contented with only a slight remark on Hetty's being later than was expected; while Hetty, who had looked out of spirits when he met her, smiled and talked, and waited on them all with unusual promptitude.

That was the last time he had seen her; but he meant to make leisure for going to the Farm to-morrow. To-day, he knew, was her day for going to the Chase to sew with the lady's-maid, so he would get as much work done as possible this evening, that the next might be clear.

One piece of work that Adam was superintending was some slight repairs at the Chase Farm, which had been hitherto occupied by Satchell, as bailiff, but which it was now rumoured that the old Squire was going to let to a smart man in top-boots, who had been seen to ride over it one day. Nothing but the desire to get a tenant could account for the Squire's undertaking repairs, though the Saturday-evening party at Mr Casson's agreed over their pipes that no man in his senses would take the Chase Farm unless there was a bit more plough-land laid to it. However that might be, the repairs were ordered to be executed with all despatch; and Adam, acting for Mr Bürge, was carrying out the order with his usual energy. But to-day, having been occupied elsewhere, he had not been able to arrive at the Chase Farm till late in the afternoon; and he then discovered that some old roofing, which he had calculated on preserving, had given way. There was clearly no good to be done with this part of the building without pulling it all down; and Adam immediately saw in his mind a plan for building it up again, so as to make the most convenient of cow-sheds and calf-pens, with a hovel for implements; and all without any great expense for materials. So, when the workmen were gone, he sat down, took out his pocket-book, and busied himself with sketching a plan, and making a specification of the expenses, that he might show it to Bürge the next morning, and set him on persuading the Squire to consent. To 'make a good job' of anything, however small, was always a pleasure to Adam; and he sat on a block, with his book resting on a planing-table, whistling low every now and then, and turning his head on one side with a just perceptible smile of gratification — of pride, too, for if Adam loved a bit of good work, he loved also to think, 'I did it!' And I believe the only people who are free from that weakness are those who have no work to call their own. It was nearly seven before he had finished and put on his jacket again; and on giving a last look round, he observed that Seth, who had been working here to-day, had left his basket of tools behind him. 'Why, th' lad's forgot his tools,' thought Adam, 'and he's got to work up at the shop to-morrow. There never was such a chap for wool-gathering; he'd leave his head behind him, if it was loose. However, it's lucky I've seen 'em; I'll carry 'em home.'

The buildings of the Chase Farm lay at one extremity of the Chase, at about ten minutes' walking distance from the Abbey. Adam had come thither on his pony, intending to ride to the stables, and put up his nag on his way home. At the stables he encountered Mr Craig, who had come to look at the Captain's new horse, on which he was to ride away the day after tomorrow; and Mr Craig detained him to tell how all the servants were to collect at the gate of the courtyard to wish the young Squire luck as he rode out; so that, by the time Adam had got into the Chase, and was striding along with the basket of tools over his shoulder, the sun was on the point of setting, and was sending level crimson rays among the great trunks of the old oaks, and touching every bare patch of ground with a transient glory, that made it look like a jewel dropt upon the grass. The wind had fallen now, and there was only enough breeze to stir the delicate-stemmed leaves. Any one who had been sitting in the house all day would have been glad to walk now; but Adam had been quite enough in the open air to wish to shorten his way home; and he bethought himself that he might do so by striking across the Chase and going through the Grove, where he had never been for years. He hurried on across the Chase, stalking along the narrow paths between the fern, with Gyp at his heels, not lingering to watch the magnificent changes of the light — hardly once thinking of it — yet feeling its presence in a certain calm happy awe which mingled itself with his busy working-day thoughts. How could he help feeling it? The very deer felt it, and were more timid.

Presently Adam's thoughts recurred to what Mr Craig had said about Arthur Donnithorne, and pictured his going away, and the changes that might take place before he came back: then they travelled back affectionately over the old scenes of boyish companionship, and dwelt on Arthur's good qualities, which Adam had a pride in, as we all have in the virtues of the superior who honours us. A nature like Adam's, with a great need of love and reverence in it, depends for so much of its happiness on what it can believe and feel about others! And he had no ideal world of dead heroes; he knew little of the life of men in the past; he must find the beings to whom he could cling with loving admiration among those who came within speech of him. These pleasant thoughts about Arthur brought a milder expression than usual into his keen rough face: perhaps they were the reason why, when he opened the old green gate leading into the Grove,

he paused to pat Gyp, and say a kind word to him.

After that pause, he strode on again along the broad winding path through the Grove. What grand beeches! Adam delighted in a fine tree of all things; as the fisherman's sight is keenest on the sea, so Adam's perceptions were more at home with trees than with other objects. He kept them in his memory, as a painter does, with all the flecks and knots in their bark, all the curves and angles of their boughs; and had often calculated the height and contents of a trunk to a nicety, as he stood looking at it. No wonder that, notwithstanding his desire to get on, he could not help pausing to look at a curious large beech which he had seen standing before him at a turning in the road, and convince himself that it was not two trees wedded together, but only one. For the rest of his life he remembered that moment when he was calmly examining the beech, as a man remembers his last glimpse of the home where his youth was passed, before the road turned, and he saw it no more. The beech stood at the last turning before the Grove ended in an archway of boughs that let in the eastern light; and as Adam stepped away from the tree to continue his walk, his eyes fell on two figures about twenty yards before him.

He remained as motionless as a statue, and turned almost as pale. The two figures were standing opposite to each other, with clasped hands, about to part; and while they were bending to kiss, Gyp, who had been running among the brushwood, came out, caught sight of them, and gave a sharp bark. They separated with a start — one hurried through the gate out of the Grove, and the other, turning round, walked slowly, with a sort of saunter, towards Adam, who still stood transfixed and pale, clutching tighter the stick with which he held the basket of tools over his shoulder, and looking at the approaching figure with eyes in which amazement was fast turning to fierceness.

Arthur Donnithorne looked flushed and excited; he had tried to make unpleasant feelings more bearable by drinking a little more wine than usual at dinner to-day, and was still enough under its flattering influence to think more lightly of this unwished-for rencontre with Adam than he would otherwise have done. After all, Adam was the best person who could have happened to see him and Hetty together: he was a sensible fellow, and would not babble about it to other people. Arthur felt confident that he could laugh the thing off, and explain it away. And so he sauntered forward with elaborate carelessness — his flushed face, his evening dress of fine cloth and fine linen, his hands half thrust into his waistcoat-pockets, all shone upon by the strange evening light which the light clouds had caught up even to the zenith, and were now shedding down between the topmost branches above him.

Adam was still motionless, looking at him as he came up. He understood it all now — the locket, and everything else that had been doubtful to him: a terrible scorching light showed him the hidden letters that changed the meaning of the past. If he had moved a muscle, he must inevitably have sprung upon Arthur like a tiger; and in the conflicting emotions that filled those long moments, he had told himself that he would not give loose to passion, he would only speak the right thing. He stood as if petrified by an unseen force, but the force was his own strong will.

'Well, Adam,' said Arthur, 'you've been looking at the fine old beeches, eh? They're not to be come near by the hatchet, though; this is a sacred grove. I overtook pretty little Hetty Sorrel as I was coming to my den — the Hermitage, there. She ought not to come home this way so late. So I took care of her to the gate, and asked for a kiss for my pains. But I must get back now, for this road is confoundedly damp. Good-night, Adam: I shall see you to-morrow — to say good-bye, you know.'

Arthur was too much preoccupied with the part he was playing himself to be thoroughly aware of the expression in Adam's face. He did not look directly at Adam, but glanced carelessly round at the trees, and then lifted up one foot to look at the sole of his boot. He cared to say no more; he had thrown quite dust enough into honest Adam's eyes; and as he spoke the last words, he walked on.

'Stop a bit, sir,' said Adam, in a hard peremptory voice, without turning round. 'I've got a word to say to you.'

Arthur paused in surprise. Susceptible persons are more affected by a change of tone than by unexpected words, and Arthur had the susceptibility of a nature at once affectionate and vain. He was still more surprised when he saw that Adam had not moved, but stood with his back to him, as if summoning him to return. What did he mean? He was going to make a serious business of this affair. Arthur felt his temper rising. A patronizing disposition always has its meaner side, and in the confusion of his irritation and alarm there entered the feeling that a man to whom he had shown so much favour as to Adam, was not in a position to criticize his conduct. And yet he was dominated, as one who feels himself in the wrong always is, by the man whose good opinion he cares for. In spite of pride and temper, there was as much deprecation as anger in his voice when he said –

'What do you mean, Adam?'

'I mean, sir,' answered Adam, in the same harsh voice, still without turning round, — 'I mean, sir, that

you don't deceive me by your light words. This is not the first time you've met Hetty Sorrel in this grove, and this is not the first time you've kissed her.'

Arthur felt a startled uncertainty how far Adam was speaking from knowledge, and how far from mere inference. And this uncertainty, which prevented him from contriving a prudent answer, heightened his irritation. He said in a high sharp tone –

'Well, sir, what then?'

'Why, then, instead of acting like th' upright, honourable man we've all believed you to be, you've been acting the part of a selfish light-minded scoundrel. You know, as well as I do, what it's to lead to, when a gentleman like you kisses and makes love to a young woman like Hetty, and gives her presents as she's frightened for other folks to see. And I say it again, you're acting the part of a selfish, light-minded scoundrel, though it cuts me to th' heart to say so, and I'd rather ha' lost my right hand.'

'Let me tell you, Adam,' said Arthur, bridling his growing anger, and trying to recur to his careless tone, 'you're not only devilishly impertinent, but you're talking nonsense. Every pretty girl is not such a fool as you, to suppose that when a gentleman admires her beauty, and pays her a little attention, he must mean something particular. Every man likes to flirt with a pretty girl, and every pretty girl likes to be flirted with. The wider the distance between them the less harm there is, for then she's not likely to deceive herself.'

'I don't know what you mean by flirting,' said Adam, 'but if you mean behaving to a woman as if you loved her, and yet not loving her all the while, I say that's not the action of an honest man, and what isn't honest does come t' harm. I'm not a fool, and you're not a fool, and you know better than what you're saying. You know it couldn't be made public as you've behaved to Hetty as y' have done without her losing her character, and bringing shame and trouble on her and her relations. What if you meant nothing by your kissing and your presents? Other folks won't believe as you've meant nothing; and don't tell me about her not deceiving herself. I tell you as you've filled her mind so with the thought of you as it'll mayhap poison her life; and she'll never love another man as 'ud make her a good husband.'

Arthur had felt a sudden relief while Adam was speaking; he perceived that Adam had no positive knowledge of the past, and that there was no irrevocable damage done by this evening's unfortunate rencontre. Adam could still be deceived. The candid Arthur had brought himself into a position in which successful lying was his only hope. The hope allayed his anger a little.

'Well, Adam,' he said, in a tone of friendly concession, 'you're perhaps right. Perhaps I've gone a little too far in taking notice of the pretty little thing, and stealing a kiss now and then. You're such a grave, steady fellow, you don't understand the temptation to such trifling. I'm sure I wouldn't bring any trouble or annoyance on her and the good Poysers on any account if I could help it. But I think you look a little too seriously at it. You know I'm going away immediately, so I shan't make any more mistakes of the kind. But let us say good-night,' — Arthur here turned round to walk on, — 'and talk no more about the matter. The whole thing will soon be forgotten.'

'No, by God!' Adam burst out with rage that could be controlled no longer, throwing down the basket of tools, and striding forward till he was right in front of Arthur. All his jealousy and sense of personal injury, which he had been hitherto trying to keep under, had leaped up and mastered him. What man of us, in the first moments of a sharp agony, could ever feel that the fellow-man who has been the medium of inflicting it, did not mean to hurt us? In our instinctive rebellion against pain, we are children again, and demand an active will to wreak our vengeance on. Adam at this moment could only feel that he had been robbed of Hetty — robbed treacherously by the man in whom he had trusted; and he stood close in front of Arthur, with fierce eyes glaring at him, with pale lips and clenched hands, the hard tones in which he had hitherto been constraining himself to express no more than a just indignation, giving way to a deep agitated voice that seemed to shake him as he spoke.

'No, it'll not be soon forgot, as you've come in between her and me, when she might ha' loved me — it'll not soon be forgot as you've robbed me o' my happiness, while I thought you was my best friend, and a noble-minded man, as I was proud to work for. And you've been kissing her, and meaning nothing, have you? And I never kissed her i' my life — but I'd ha' worked hard for years for the right to kiss her. And you make light of it. You think little o' doing what may damage other folks, so as you get your bit o' trifling, as means nothing. I throw back your favours, for you're not the man I took you for. I'll never count you my friend any more. I'd rather you'd act as my enemy, and fight me where I stand — it's all th' amends you can make me.'

Poor Adam, possessed by rage that could find no other vent, began to throw off his coat and his cap, too blind with passion to notice the change that had taken place in Arthur while he was speaking. Arthur's lips were now as pale as Adam's; his heart was beating violently. The discovery that Adam loved Hetty was a shock which made him for the moment see himself in the light of Adam's indignation, and regard Adam's

suffering as not merely a consequence, but an element of his error. The words of hatred and contempt — the first he had ever heard in his life — seemed like scorching missiles that were making ineffaceable scars on him. All screening self-excuse, which rarely falls quite away while others respect us, forsook him for an instant, and he stood face to face with the first great irrevocable evil he had ever committed. He was only twenty-one — and three months ago — nay, much later — he had thought proudly that no man should ever be able to reproach him justly. His first impulse, if there had been time for it, would perhaps have been to utter words of propitiation; but Adam had no sooner thrown off his coat and cap, than he became aware that Arthur was standing pale and motionless, with his hands still thrust in his waistcoat-pockets.

'What!' he said, 'won't you fight me like a man? You know I won't strike you while you stand so.'

'Go away, Adam,' said Arthur, 'I don't want to fight you.'

'No,' said Adam, bitterly; 'you don't want to fight me, — you think I'm a common man, as you can injure without answering for it.'

'I never meant to injure you,' said Arthur, with returning anger. 'I didn't know you loved her.'

'But you've made her love *you*,' said Adam. 'You're a double-faced man — I'll never believe a word you say again.'

'Go away, I tell you,' said Arthur, angrily, 'or we shall both repent.'

'No,' said Adam, with a convulsed voice, 'I swear I won't go away without fighting you. Do you want provoking any more? I tell you you're a coward and a scoundrel, and I despise you.'

The colour had all rushed back to Arthur's face: in a moment his right hand was clenched, and dealt a blow like lightning, which sent Adam staggering backward. His blood was as thoroughly up as Adam's now, and the two men, forgetting the emotions that had gone before, fought with the instinctive fierceness of panthers in the deepening twilight darkened by the trees. The delicate-handed gentleman was a match for the workman in everything but strength, and Arthur's skill enabled him to protract the struggle for some long moments. But between unarmed men the battle is to the strong, where the strong is no blunderer, and Arthur must sink under a well-planted blow of Adam's, as a steel rod is broken by an iron bar. The blow soon came, and Arthur fell, his head lying concealed in a tuft of fern, so that Adam could only discern his darkly-clad body.

He stood still in the dim light waiting for Arthur to rise.

The blow had been given now, towards which he had been straining all the force of nerve and muscle — and what was the good of it? What had he done by fighting? Only satisfied his own passion, only wreaked his own vengeance. He had not rescued Hetty, nor changed the past — there it was just as it had been, and he sickened at the vanity of his own rage.

But why did not Arthur rise? He was perfectly motionless, and the time seemed long to Adam…. Good God! had the blow been too much for him? Adam shuddered at the thought of his own strength, as with the oncoming of this dread he knelt down by Arthur's side and lifted his head from among the fern. There was no sign of life: the eyes and teeth were set. The horror that rushed over Adam completely mastered him, and forced upon him its own belief. He could feel nothing but that death was in Arthur's face, and that he was helpless before it. He made not a single movement, but knelt like an image of despair gazing at an image of death.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A Dilemma

It was only a few minutes measured by the clock — though Adam always thought it had been a long while — before he perceived a gleam of consciousness in Arthur's face and a slight shiver through his frame. The intense joy that flooded his soul brought back some of the old affection with it.

'Do you feel any pain, sir?' he said, tenderly, loosening Arthur's cravat.

Arthur turned his eyes on Adam with a vague stare which gave way to a slightly startled motion as if from the shock of returning memory. But he only shivered again and said nothing.

'Do you feel any hurt, sir?' Adam said again, with a trembling in his voice.

Arthur put his hand up to his waistcoat buttons, and when Adam had unbuttoned it, he took a longer breath. 'Lay my head down,' he said, faintly, 'and get me some water if you can.'

Adam laid the head down gently on the fern again, and emptying the tools out of the flag-basket, hurried through the trees to the edge of the Grove bordering on the Chase, where a brook ran below the bank.

When he returned with his basket leaking, but still half full, Arthur looked at him with a more thoroughly reawakened consciousness.

'Can you drink a drop out o' your hand, sir?' said Adam, kneeling down again to lift up Arthur's head.

'No,' said Arthur, 'dip my cravat in and souse it on my head.'

The water seemed to do him some good, for he presently raised himself a little higher, resting on Adam's arm.

'Do you feel any hurt inside, sir?' Adam asked again.

'No — no hurt,' said Arthur, still faintly, 'but rather done up.'

After a while he said, 'I suppose I fainted away when you knocked me down.'

'Yes, sir, thank God,' said Adam. 'I thought it was worse.'

'What! you thought you'd done for me, eh? come, help me on my legs.'

'I feel terribly shaky and dizzy,' Arthur said, as he stood leaning on Adam's arm; 'that blow of yours must have come against me like a battering-ram. I don't believe I can walk alone.'

'Lean on me, sir; I'll get you along,' said Adam. 'Or, will you sit down a bit longer, on my coat here? and I'll prop y' up. You'll perhaps be better in a minute or two.'

'No,' said Arthur. 'I'll go to the Hermitage — I think I've got some brandy there. There's a short road to it a little further on, near the gate. If you'll just help me on.'

They walked slowly, with frequent pauses, but without speaking again. In both of them, the concentration in the present which had attended the first moments of Arthur's revival, had now given way to a vivid recollection of the previous scene. It was nearly dark in the narrow path among the trees, but within the circle of fir-trees round the Hermitage there was room for the growing moonlight to enter in at the windows. Their steps were noiseless on the thick carpet of fir-needles, and the outward stillness seemed to heighten their inward consciousness, as Arthur took the key out of his pocket and placed it in Adam's hand, for him to open the door. Adam had not known before that Arthur had furnished the old Hermitage and made it a retreat for himself, and it was a surprise to him when he opened the door to see a snug room with all the signs of frequent habitation.

Arthur loosed Adam's arm and threw himself on the ottoman. 'You'll see my hunting-bottle somewhere,' he said. 'A leather case with a bottle and glass in.'

Adam was not long in finding the case. 'There's very little brandy in it, sir,' he said, turning it downwards over the glass, as he held it before the window, 'hardly this little glassful.'

'Well, give me that,' said Arthur, with the peevishness of physical depression. When he had taken some sips, Adam said, 'Hadn't I better run to th' house, sir, and get some more brandy? I can be there and back pretty soon. It'll be a stiff walk home for you, if you don't have something to revive you.'

'Yes — go. But don't say I'm ill. Ask for my man Pym, and tell him to get it from Mills, and not to say I'm at the Hermitage. Get some water too.'

Adam was relieved to have an active task — both of them were relieved to be apart from each other for a

short time. But Adam's swift pace could not still the eager pain of thinking – of living again with concentrated suffering through the last wretched hour, and looking out from it over all the new, sad future.

Arthur lay still for some minutes after Adam was gone, but presently he rose feebly from the ottoman and peered about slowly in the broken moonlight, seeking something. It was a short bit of wax candle that stood amongst a confusion of writing and drawing materials. There was more searching for the means of lighting the candle, and when that was done, he went cautiously round the room as if wishing to assure himself of the presence or absence of something. At last he had found a slight thing, which he put first in his pocket, and then, on a second thought, took out again, and thrust deep down into a waste-paper basket. It was a woman's little pink silk neckerchief. He set the candle on the table, and threw himself down on the ottoman again, exhausted with the effort.

When Adam came back with his supplies, his entrance awoke Arthur from a doze.

'That's right,' Arthur said; 'I'm tremendously in want of some brandy-vigour.'

'I'm glad to see you've got a light, sir,' said Adam. 'I've been thinking I'd better have asked for a lanthorn.'

'No, no; the candle will last long enough — I shall soon be up to walking home now.'

'I can't go before I've seen you safe home, sir,' said Adam, hesitatingly.

'No: it will be better for you to stay — sit down.'

Adam sat down, and they remained opposite to each other in uneasy silence, while Arthur slowly drank brandy-and-water, with visibly renovating effect. He began to lie in a more voluntary position, and looked as if he were less overpowered by bodily sensations. Adam was keenly alive to these indications, and as his anxiety about Arthur's condition began to be allayed, he felt more of that impatience which every one knows who has had his just indignation suspended by the physical state of the culprit. Yet there was one thing on his mind to be done before he could recur to remonstrance: it was to confess what had been unjust in his own words. Perhaps he longed all the more to make this confession, that his indignation might be free again; and as he saw the signs of returning ease in Arthur, the words again and again came to his lips and went back, checked by the thought that it would be better to leave everything till to-morrow. As long as they were silent they did not look at each other, and a foreboding came across Adam that if they began to speak as though they remembered the past — if they looked at each with full recognition — they must take fire again. So they sat in silence till the bit of wax candle flickered low in the socket; the silence all the while becoming more irksome to Adam. Arthur had just poured out some more brandy-and-water, and he threw one arm behind his head and drew up one leg in an attitude of recovered ease, which was an irresistible temptation to Adam to speak what was on his mind.

'You begin to feel more yourself again, sir,' he said, as the candle went out, and they were half-hidden from each other in the faint moonlight.

'Yes: I don't feel good for much — very lazy, and not inclined to move; but I'll go home when I've taken this dose.'

There was a slight pause before Adam said –

'My temper got the better of me, and I said things as wasn't true. I'd no right to speak as if you'd known you was doing me an injury: you'd no grounds for knowing it; I've always kept what I felt for her as secret as I could.'

He paused again before he went on.

'And perhaps I judged you too harsh — I'm apt to be harsh; and you may have acted out o' thoughtlessness more than I should ha' believed was possible for a man with a heart and a conscience. We're not all put together alike, and we may misjudge one another. God knows, it's all the joy I could have now, to think the best of you.'

Arthur wanted to go home without saying any more — he was too painfully embarrassed in mind, as well as too weak in body, to wish for any further explanation to-night. And yet it was a relief to him that Adam reopened the subject in a way the least difficult for him to answer. Arthur was in the wretched position of an open, generous man, who has committed an error which makes deception seem a necessity. The native impulse to give truth in return for truth, to meet trust with frank confession, must be suppressed, and duty was become a question of tactics. His deed was reacting upon him — was already governing him tyrannously, and forcing him into a course that jarred with his habitual feelings. The only aim that seemed admissible to him now was to deceive Adam to the utmost: to make Adam think better of him than he deserved. And when he heard the words of honest retractation — when he heard the sad appeal with which Adam ended — he was obliged to rejoice in the remains of ignorant confidence it implied. He did not answer immediately, for he had to be judicious, and not truthful.

'Say no more about our anger, Adam,' he said, at last, very languidly, for the labour of speech was

unwelcome to him; ‘I forgive your momentary injustice — it was quite natural, with the exaggerated notions you had in your mind. We shall be none the worse friends in future, I hope, because we’ve fought: you had the best of it, and that was as it should be, for I believe I’ve been most in the wrong of the two. Come, let us shake hands.’

Arthur held out his hand, but Adam sat still.

‘I don’t like to say “No” to that, sir,’ he said, ‘but I can’t shake hands till it’s clear what we mean by’t. I was wrong when I spoke as if you’d done me an injury knowingly, but I wasn’t wrong in what I said before, about your behaviour t’ Hetty, and I can’t shake hands with you as if I held you my friend the same as ever, till you’ve cleared that up better.’

Arthur swallowed his pride and resentment as he drew back his hand. He was silent for some moments, and then said, as indifferently as he could –

‘I don’t know what you mean by clearing up, Adam. I’ve told you already that you think too seriously of a little flirtation. But if you are right in supposing there is any danger in it — I’m going away on Saturday, and there will be an end of it. As for the pain it has given you, I’m heartily sorry for it. I can say no more.’

Adam said nothing, but rose from his chair, and stood with his face towards one of the windows, as if looking at the blackness of the moonlit fir-trees; but he was in reality conscious of nothing but the conflict within him. It was of no use now – his resolution not to speak till to-morrow: he must speak there and then. But it was several minutes before he turned round and stepped nearer to Arthur, standing and looking down on him as he lay.

‘It’ll be better for me to speak plain,’ he said, with evident effort, ‘though it’s hard work. You see, sir, this isn’t a trifle to me, whatever it may be to you. I’m none o’ them men as can go making love first to one woman and then t’ another, and don’t think it much odds which of ’em I take. What I feel for Hetty’s a different sort o’ love, such as I believe nobody can know much about but them as feel it, and God as has given it to ’em. She’s more nor everything else to me, all but my conscience and my good name. And if it’s true what you’ve been saying all along — and if it’s only been trifling and flirting as you call it, as’ll be put an end to by your going away — why, then, I’d wait, and hope her heart ’ud turn to me after all. I’m loath to think you’d speak false to me, and I’ll believe your word, however things may look.’

‘You would be wronging Hetty more than me not to believe it,’ said Arthur, almost violently, starting up from the ottoman, and moving away. But he threw himself into a chair again directly, saying, more feebly, ‘You seem to forget that, in suspecting me, you are casting imputations upon her.’

‘Nay, sir,’ Adam said, in a calmer voice, as if he were half relieved — for he was too straightforward to make a distinction between a direct falsehood and an indirect one — ‘Nay, sir, things don’t lie level between Hetty and you. You’re acting with your eyes open, whatever you may do; but how do you know what’s been in her mind? She’s all but a child — as any man with a conscience in him ought to feel bound to take care on. And whatever you may think, I know you’ve disturbed her mind. I know she’s been fixing her heart on you; for there’s a many things clear to me now as I didn’t understand before. But you seem to make light o’ what *she* may feel — you don’t think o’ that.’

‘Good God, Adam, let me alone!’ Arthur burst out impetuously; ‘I feel it enough without your worrying me.’

He was aware of his indiscretion as soon as the words had escaped him.

‘Well, then, if you feel it,’ Adam rejoined eagerly; ‘if you feel as you may ha’ put false notions into her mind, and made her believe as you loved her, when all the while you meant nothing, I’ve this demand to make of you; — I’m not speaking for myself, but for her. I ask you t’ undeceive her before you go away. Y’aren’t going away for ever; and if you leave her behind with a notion in her head o’ your feeling about her the same as she feels about you, she’ll be hankering after you, and the mischief may get worse. It may be a smart to her now, but it’ll save her pain i’ th’ end. I ask you to write a letter — you may trust to my seeing as she gets it: tell her the truth, and take blame to yourself for behaving as you’d no right to do to a young woman as isn’t your equal. I speak plain, sir. But I can’t speak any other way. There’s nobody can take care o’ Hetty in this thing but me.’

‘I can do what I think needful in the matter,’ said Arthur, more and more irritated by mingled distress and perplexity, ‘without giving promises to you. I shall take what measures I think proper.’

‘No,’ said Adam, in an abrupt decided tone, ‘that won’t do. I must know what ground I’m treading on. I must be safe as you’ve put an end to what ought never to ha’ been begun. I don’t forget what’s owing to you as a gentleman; but in this thing we’re man and man, and I can’t give up.’

There was no answer for some moments. Then Arthur said, ‘I’ll see you to-morrow. I can bear no more now; I’m ill.’ He rose as he spoke, and reached his cap, as if intending to go.

‘You won’t see her again!’ Adam exclaimed, with a flash of recurring anger and suspicion, moving

towards the door and placing his back against it. ‘Either tell me she can never be my wife — tell me you’ve been lying — or else promise me what I’ve said.’

Adam, uttering this alternative, stood like a terrible fate before Arthur, who had moved forward a step or two, and now stopped, faint, shaken, sick in mind and body. It seemed long to both of them — that inward struggle of Arthur’s — before he said, feebly, ‘I promise; let me go.’

Adam moved away from the door and opened it, but when Arthur reached the step, he stopped again and leaned against the door-post.

‘You’re not well enough to walk alone, sir,’ said Adam. ‘Take my arm again.’

Arthur made no answer, and presently walked on, Adam following. But, after a few steps, he stood still again, and said coldly, ‘I believe I must trouble you. It’s getting late now, and there may be an alarm set up about me at home.’

Adam gave his arm, and they walked on without uttering a word, till they came where the basket and the tools lay.

‘I must pick up the tools, sir,’ Adam said. ‘They’re my brother’s. I doubt they’ll be rusted. If you’ll please to wait a minute.’

Arthur stood still without speaking, and no other word passed between them till they were at the side entrance, where he hoped to get in without being seen by any one. He said then, ‘Thank you; I needn’t trouble you any further.’

‘What time will it be conven’ent for me to see you to-morrow, sir?’ said Adam.

‘You may send me word that you’re here at five o’clock,’ said Arthur; ‘not before.’

‘Good-night, sir,’ said Adam. But he heard no reply; Arthur had turned into the house.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Next Morning

Arthur did not pass a sleepless night; he slept long and well. For sleep comes to the perplexed — if the perplexed are only weary enough. But at seven he rang his bell and astonished Pym by declaring he was going to get up, and must have breakfast brought to him at eight.

'And see that my mare is saddled at half-past eight, and tell my grandfather when he's down that I'm better this morning, and am gone for a ride.'

He had been awake an hour, and could rest in bed no longer. In bed our yesterdays are too oppressive: if a man can only get up, though it be but to whistle or to smoke, he has a present which offers some resistance to the past — sensations which assert themselves against tyrannous memories. And if there were such a thing as taking averages of feeling, it would certainly be found that in the hunting and shooting seasons regret, self-reproach, and mortified pride, weigh lighter on country gentlemen than in late spring and summer. Arthur felt that he should be more of a man on horseback. Even the presence of Pym, waiting on him with the usual deference, was a reassurance to him after the scenes of yesterday. For, with Arthur's sensitiveness to opinion, the loss of Adam's respect was a shock to his self-contentment which suffused his imagination with the sense that he had sunk in all eyes; as a sudden shock of fear from some real peril makes a nervous woman afraid even to step, because all her perceptions are suffused with a sense of danger.

Arthur's, as you know, was a loving nature. Deeds of kindness were as easy to him as a bad habit; they were the common issue of his weaknesses and good qualities, of his egoism and his sympathy. He didn't like to witness pain, and he liked to have grateful eyes beaming on him as the giver of pleasure. When he was a lad of seven, he one day kicked down an old gardener's pitcher of broth, from no motive but a kicking impulse, not reflecting that it was the old man's dinner; but on learning that sad fact, he took his favourite pencil-case and a silver-hafted knife out of his pocket and offered them as compensation. He had been the same Arthur ever since, trying to make all offences forgotten in benefits. If there were any bitterness in his nature, it could only show itself against the man who refused to be conciliated by him. And perhaps the time was come for some of that bitterness to rise. At the first moment, Arthur had felt pure distress and self-reproach at discovering that Adam's happiness was involved in his relation to Hetty: if there had been a possibility of making Adam tenfold amends — if deeds of gift, or any other deeds, could have restored Adam's contentment and regard for him as a benefactor, Arthur would not only have executed them without hesitation, but would have felt bound all the more closely to Adam, and would never have been weary of making retribution. But Adam could receive no amends; his suffering could not be cancelled; his respect and affection could not be recovered by any prompt deeds of atonement. He stood like an immovable obstacle against which no pressure could avail; an embodiment of what Arthur most shrank from believing in — the irrevocableness of his own wrong-doing. The words of scorn, the refusal to shake hands, the mastery asserted over him in their last conversation in the Hermitage — above all, the sense of having been knocked down, to which a man does not very well reconcile himself, even under the most heroic circumstances — pressed on him with a galling pain which was stronger than compunction. Arthur would so gladly have persuaded himself that he had done no harm! And if no one had told him the contrary, he could have persuaded himself so much better. Nemesis can seldom forge a sword for herself out of our consciences — out of the suffering we feel in the suffering we may have caused: there is rarely metal enough there to make an effective weapon. Our moral sense learns the manners of good society, and smiles when others smile; but when some rude person gives rough names to our actions, she is apt to take part against us. And so it was with Arthur: Adam's judgement of him, Adam's grating words, disturbed his self-soothing arguments.

Not that Arthur had been at ease before Adam's discovery. Struggles and resolves had transformed themselves into compunction and anxiety. He was distressed for Hetty's sake, and distressed for his own, that he must leave her behind. He had always, both in making and breaking resolutions, looked beyond his passion, and seen that it must speedily end in separation; but his nature was too ardent and tender for him not to suffer at this parting; and on Hetty's account he was filled with uneasiness. He had found out the dream in which she was living — that she was to be a lady in silks and satins; and when he had first talked

to her about his going away, she had asked him tremblingly to let her go with him and be married. It was his painful knowledge of this which had given the most exasperating sting to Adam's reproaches. He had said no word with the purpose of deceiving her, her vision was all spun by her own childish fancy; but he was obliged to confess to himself that it was spun half out of his own actions. And to increase the mischief, on this last evening he had not dared to hint the truth to Hetty: he had been obliged to soothe her with tender, hopeful words, lest he should throw her into violent distress. He felt the situation acutely; felt the sorrow of the dear thing in the present, and thought with a darker anxiety of the tenacity which her feelings might have in the future. That was the one sharp point which pressed against him; every other he could evade by hopeful self-persuasion. The whole thing had been secret; the Poysers had not the shadow of a suspicion. No one, except Adam, knew anything of what had passed — no one else was likely to know; for Arthur had impressed on Hetty that it would be fatal to betray, by word or look, that there had been the least intimacy between them; and Adam, who knew half their secret, would rather help them to keep it than betray it. It was an unfortunate business altogether, but there was no use in making it worse than it was, by imaginary exaggerations and forebodings of evil that might never come. The temporary sadness for Hetty was the worst consequence; he resolutely turned away his eyes from any bad consequence that was not demon-strably inevitable. But — but Hetty might have had the trouble in some other way if not in this. And perhaps hereafter he might be able to do a great deal for her, and make up to her for all the tears she would shed about him. She would owe the advantage of his care for her in future years to the sorrow she had incurred now. *So* good comes out of evil. Such is the beautiful arrangement of things!

Are you inclined to ask whether this can be the same Arthur who, two months ago, had that freshness of feeling, that delicate honour which shrinks from wounding even a sentiment, and does not contemplate any more positive offence as possible for it? — who thought that his own self-respect was a higher tribunal than any external opinion? The same, I assure you, only under different conditions. Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds;[1] and until we know what has been or will be the peculiar combination of outward with inward facts, which constitutes a man's critical actions, it will be better not to think ourselves wise about his character. There is a terrible coercion in our deeds which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver, and then reconcile him to the change; for this reason — that the second wrong presents itself to him in the guise of the only practicable right. The action which before commission has been seen with that blended common-sense and fresh untarnished feeling which is the healthy eye of the soul, is looked at afterwards with the lens of apologetic ingenuity, through which all things that men call beautiful and ugly are seen to be made up of textures very much alike. Europe adjusts itself to a *fait accompli*,[2] and so does an individual character, — until the placid adjustment is disturbed by a convulsive retribution.

No man can escape this vitiating effect of an offence against his own sentiment of right, and the effect was the stronger in Arthur because of that very need of self-respect which, while his conscience was still at ease, was one of his best safeguards. Self-accusation was too painful to him — he could not face it. He must persuade himself that he had not been very much to blame; he began even to pity himself for the necessity he was under of deceiving Adam: it was a course so opposed to the honesty of his own nature. But then, it was the only right thing to do.

Well, whatever had been amiss in him, he was miserable enough in consequence: miserable about Hetty: miserable about this letter that he had promised to write, and that seemed at one moment to be a gross barbarity, at another perhaps the greatest kindness he could do to her. And across all this reflection would dart every now and then a sudden impulse of passionate defiance towards all consequences; he would carry Hetty away, and all other considerations might go to…

In this state of mind the four walls of his room made an intolerable prison to him; they seemed to hem in and press down upon him all the crowd of contradictory thoughts and conflicting feelings, some of which would fly away in the open air. He had only an hour or two to make up his mind in, and he must get clear and calm. Once on Meg's back, in the fresh air of that fine morning, he should be more master of the situation.

The pretty creature arched her bay neck in the sunshine, and pawed the gravel, and trembled with pleasure when her master stroked her nose, and patted her, and talked to her even in a more caressing tone than usual. He loved her the better because she knew nothing of his secrets. But Meg was quite as well acquainted with her master's mental state as many others of her sex with the mental condition of the nice young gentlemen towards whom their hearts are in a state of fluttering expectation.

Arthur cantered for five miles beyond the Chase, till he was at the foot of a hill where there were no hedges or trees to hem in the road. Then he threw the bridle on Meg's neck, and prepared to make up his mind.

Hetty knew that their meeting yesterday must be the last before Arthur went away; there was no possibility of their contriving another without exciting suspicion; and she was like a frightened child,

unable to think of anything, only able to cry at the mention of parting, and then put her face up to have the tears kissed away. He *could* do nothing but comfort her, and lull her into dreaming on. A letter would be a dreadfully abrupt way of awakening her! Yet there was truth in what Adam said — that it would save her from a lengthened delusion, which might be worse than a sharp immediate pain. And it was the only way of satisfying Adam, who *must* be satisfied, for more reasons than one. If he could have seen her again! But that was impossible; there was such a thorny hedge of hindrances between them, and an imprudence would be fatal. And yet, if he *could* see her again, what good would it do? Only cause him to suffer more from the sight of her distress and the remembrance of it. Away from him, she was surrounded by all the motives to self-control.

A sudden dread here fell like a shadow across his imagination — the dread lest she should do something violent in her grief; and close upon that dread came another, which deepened the shadow. But he shook them off with the force of youth and hope. What was the ground for painting the future in that dark way? It was just as likely to be the reverse. Arthur told himself, he did not deserve that things should turn out badly — he had never meant beforehand to do anything his conscience disapproved — he had been led on by circumstances. There was a sort of implicit confidence in him that he was really such a good fellow at bottom, Providence would not treat him harshly.

At all events, he couldn't help what would come now: all he could do was to take what seemed the best course at the present moment. And he persuaded himself that that course was to make the way open between Adam and Hetty. Her heart might really turn to Adam, as he said, after a while; and in that case there would have been no great harm done, since it was still Adam's ardent wish to make her his wife. To be sure, Adam was deceived — deceived in a way that Arthur would have resented as a deep wrong if it had been practised on himself. That was a reflection that marred the consoling prospect. Arthur's cheeks even burned in mingled shame and irritation at the thought. But what could a man do in such a dilemma? He was bound in honour to say no word that could injure Hetty: his first duty was to guard *her*. He would never have told or acted a lie on his own account. Good God! what a miserable fool he was to have brought himself into such a dilemma; and yet, if ever a man had excuses, he had. (Pity that consequences are determined not by excuses but by actions!)

Well, the letter must be written; it was the only means that promised a solution of the difficulty. The tears came into Arthur's eyes as he thought of Hetty reading it; but it would be almost as hard for him to write it: he was not doing anything easy to himself; and this last thought helped him to arrive at a conclusion. He could never deliberately have taken a step which inflicted pain on another and left himself at ease. Even a movement of jealousy at the thought of giving up Hetty to Adam, went to convince him that he was making a sacrifice.

When once he had come to this conclusion, he turned Meg round, and set off home again in a canter. The letter should be written the first thing, and the rest of the day would be filled up with other business: he should have no time to look behind him. Happily Irwine and Gawaine were coming to dinner, and by twelve o'clock the next day he should have left the Chase miles behind him. There was some security in this constant occupation against an uncontrollable impulse seizing him to rush to Hetty, and thrust into her hand some mad proposition that would undo everything. Faster and faster went the sensitive Meg, at every slight sign from her rider, till the canter had passed into a swift gallop.

'I thought they said th' young mester war took ill last night,' said sour old John, the groom, at dinner-time in the servants' hall. 'He's been ridin' fit to split the mare i' two this forenoon.'

'That's happen one o' the symptims, John,' said the facetious coachman.

'Then I wish he war let blood[3] for't, that's all,' said John, grimly.

Adam had been early at the Chase to know how Arthur was, and had been relieved from all anxiety about the effects of his blow by learning that he was gone out for a ride. At five o'clock he was punctually there again, and sent up word of his arrival. In a few minutes Pym came down with a letter in his hand, and gave it to Adam, saying that the Captain was too busy to see him, and had written everything he had to say. The letter was directed to Adam, but he went out of doors again before opening it. It contained a sealed enclosure directed to Hetty. On the inside of the cover Adam read: –

> 'In the enclosed letter I have written everything you wish. I leave it to you to decide whether you will be doing best to deliver it to Hetty or to return it to me. Ask yourself once more whether you are not taking a measure which may pain her more than mere silence.
>
> 'There is no need for our seeing each other again now. We shall meet with better feelings some months hence.
>
> A.D.'

'Perhaps he's i' th' right on't not to see me,' thought Adam. 'It's no use meeting to say more hard words,

and it's no use meeting to shake hands and say we're friends again. We're not friends, an' it's better not to pretend it. I know forgiveness is a man's duty, but, to my thinking, that can only mean as you're to give up all thoughts o' taking revenge: it can never mean as you're t' have your old feelings back again, for that's not possible. He's not the same man to me, and I can't *feel* the same towards him. God help me! I don't know whether I feel the same towards anybody: I seem as if I'd been measuring my work from a false line, and had got it all to measure over again.'

But the question about delivering the letter to Hetty soon absorbed Adam's thoughts. Arthur had procured some relief to himself by throwing the decision on Adam with a warning; and Adam, who was not given to hesitation, hesitated here. He determined to feel his way — to ascertain as well as he could what was Hetty's state of mind before he decided on delivering the letter.

CHAPTER XXX

The Delivery of the Letter

The next Sunday Adam joined the Poysers on their way out of church, hoping for an invitation to go home with them. He had the letter in his pocket, and was anxious to have an opportunity of talking to Hetty alone. He could not see her face at church, for she had changed her seat, and when he came up to her to shake hands, her manner was doubtful and constrained. He expected this, for it was the first time she had met him since she had been aware that he had seen her with Arthur in the Grove.

'Come, you'll go on with us, Adam,' Mr Poyser said when they reached the turning; and as soon as they were in the fields Adam ventured to offer his arm to Hetty. The children soon gave them an opportunity of lingering behind a little, and then Adam said –

'Will you contrive for me to walk out in the garden a bit with you this evening, if it keeps fine, Hetty? I've something partic'lar to talk to you about.'

Hetty said, 'Very well.' She was really as anxious as Adam was that she should have some private talk with him: she wondered what he thought of her and Arthur: he must have seen them kissing, she knew, but she had no conception of the scene that had taken place between Arthur and Adam. Her first feeling had been that Adam would be very angry with her, and perhaps would tell her aunt and uncle; but it never entered her mind that he would dare to say anything to Captain Donnithorne. It was a relief to her that he behaved so kindly to her to-day, and wanted to speak to *her* alone; for she had trembled when she found he was going home with them lest he should mean 'to tell'. But, now he wanted to talk to her by herself, she should learn what he thought, and what he meant to do. She felt a certain confidence that she could persuade him not to do anything she did not want him to do; she could perhaps even make him believe that she didn't care for Arthur; and as long as Adam thought there was any hope of her having him, he would do just what she liked, she knew. Besides, she *must* go on seeming to encourage Adam, lest her uncle and aunt should be angry, and suspect her of having some secret lover.

Hetty's little brain was busy with this combination, as she hung on Adam's arm, and said 'yes' or 'no' to some slight observations of his about the many hawthorn-berries there would be for the birds this next winter, and the low-hanging clouds that would hardly hold up till morning. And when they rejoined her aunt and uncle, she could pursue her thoughts without interruption, for Mr Poyser held that though a young man might like to have the woman he was courting on his arm, he would nevertheless be glad of a little reasonable talk about business the while; and, for his own part, he was curious to hear the most recent news about the Chase Farm. So, through the rest of the walk, he claimed Adam's conversation for himself; and Hetty laid her small plots, and imagined her little scenes of cunning blandishment, as she walked along by the hedgerows on honest Adam's arm, quite as well as if she had been an elegantly clad coquette alone in her boudoir. For if a country beauty in clumsy shoes be only shallow-hearted enough, it is astonishing how closely her mental processes may resemble those of a lady in society and crinoline, who applies her refined intellect to the problem of committing indiscretions without compromising herself. Perhaps the resemblance was not much the less because Hetty felt very unhappy all the while. The parting with Arthur was a double pain to her; mingling with the tumult of passion and vanity, there was a dim undefined fear that the future might shape itself in some way quite unlike her dream. She clung to the comforting hopeful words Arthur had uttered in their last meeting — 'I shall come again at Christmas, and then we will see what can be done.' She clung to the belief that he was so fond of her, he would never be happy without her; and she still hugged her secret — that a great gentleman loved her — with gratified pride, as a superiority over all the girls she knew. But the uncertainty of the future, the possibilities to which she could give no shape, began to press upon her like the invisible weight of air; she was alone on her little island of dreams, and all around her was the dark unknown water where Arthur was gone. She could gather no elation of spirits now by looking forward, but only by looking backward to build confidence on past words and caresses. But occasionally, since Thursday evening, her dim anxieties had been almost lost behind the more definite fear that Adam might betray what he knew to her uncle and aunt, and his sudden proposition to talk with her alone had set her thoughts to work in a new way. She was eager not to lose this evening's opportunity; and after tea, when the boys were going into the garden, and Totty begged to go with them, Hetty said, with an alacrity that surprised Mrs Poyser –

‘I’ll go with her, aunt.’

It did not seem at all surprising that Adam said he would go too; and soon he and Hetty were left alone together on the walk by the filbert-trees, while the boys were busy elsewhere gathering the large unripe nuts to play at ‘cob-nut’[1] with, and Totty was watching them with a puppy-like air of contemplation. It was but a short time — hardly two months — since Adam had had his mind filled with delicious hopes, as he stood by Hetty’s side in this garden. The remembrance of that scene had often been with him since Thursday evening: the sunlight through the apple-tree boughs, the red bunches, Hetty’s sweet blush. It came importunately now, on this sad evening, with the low-hanging clouds; but he tried to suppress it, lest some emotion should impel him to say more than was needful for Hetty’s sake.

‘After what I saw on Thursday night, Hetty,’ he began, ‘you won’t think me making too free in what I’m going to say. If you was being courted by any man as ’ud make you his wife, and I’d known you was fond of him, and meant to have him, I should have no right to speak a word to you about it; but when I see you’re being made love to by a gentleman as can never marry you, and doesna think o’ marrying you, I feel bound t’ interfere for you. I can’t speak about it to them as are i’ the place o’ your parents, for that might bring worse trouble than’s needful.’

Adam’s words relieved one of Hetty’s fears, but they also carried a meaning which sickened her with a strengthened foreboding. She was pale and trembling, and yet she would have angrily contradicted Adam, if she had dared to betray her feelings. But she was silent.

‘You’re so young, you know, Hetty,’ he went on, almost tenderly, ‘and y’ haven’t seen much o’ what goes on in the world. It’s right for me to do what I can to save you from getting into trouble for want o’ your knowing where you’re being led to. If anybody besides me knew what I know about your meeting a gentleman, and having fine presents from him, they’d speak light on you, and you’d lose your character. And besides that, you’ll have to suffer in your feelings, wi’ giving your love to a man as can never marry you, so as he might take care of you all your life.’

Adam paused, and looked at Hetty, who was plucking the leaves from the filbert-trees, and tearing them up in her hand. Her little plans and preconcerted speeches had all forsaken her, like an ill-learnt lesson, under the terrible agitation produced by Adam’s words. There was a cruel force in their calm certainty which threatened to grapple and crush her flimsy hopes and fancies. She wanted to resist them — she wanted to throw them off with angry contradiction; but the determination to conceal what she felt still governed her. It was nothing more than a blind prompting now, for she was unable to calculate the effect of her words.

‘You’ve no right to say as I love him,’ she said, faintly, but impetuously, plucking another rough leaf and tearing it up. She was very beautiful in her paleness and agitation, with her dark childish eyes dilated, and her breath shorter than usual. Adam’s heart yearned over her as he looked at her. Ah, if he could but comfort her, and soothe her, and save her from this pain; if he had but some sort of strength that would enable him to rescue her poor troubled mind, as he would have rescued her body in the face of all danger!

‘I doubt it must be so, Hetty,’ he said, tenderly; ‘for I canna believe you’d let any man kiss you by yourselves, and give you a gold box with his hair, and go a-walking i’ the Grove to meet him, if you didna love him. I’m not blaming you, for I know it ’ud begin by little and little, till at last you’d not be able to throw it off. It’s him I blame for stealing your love i’ that way, when he knew he could never make you the right amends. He’s been trifling with you, and making a plaything of you, and caring nothing about you as a man ought to care.’

‘Yes, he does care for me; I know better nor you,’ Hetty burst out. Everything was forgotten but the pain and anger she felt at Adam’s words.

‘Nay, Hetty,’ said Adam, ‘if he’d cared for you rightly he’d never ha’ behaved so. He told me himself he meant nothing by his kissing and presents, and he wanted to make me believe as you thought light of ’em too. But I know better nor that. I can’t help thinking as you’ve been trusting to his loving you well enough to marry you, for all he’s a gentleman. And that’s why I must speak to you about it, Hetty, — for fear you should be deceiving yourself. It’s never entered his head the thought o’ marrying you.’

‘How do you know? How durst you say so?’ said Hetty, pausing in her walk and trembling. The terrible decision of Adam’s tone shook her with fear. She had no presence of mind left for the reflection that Arthur would have his reasons for not telling the truth to Adam. Her words and look were enough to determine Adam: he must give her the letter.

‘Perhaps you can’t believe me, Hetty; because you think too well of him — because you think he loves you better than he does. But I’ve got a letter i’ my pocket, as he wrote himself for me to give you. I’ve not read the letter, but he says he’s told you the truth in it. But before I give you the letter, consider, Hetty, and don’t let it take too much hold on you. It wouldna ha’ been good for you if he’d wanted to do such a mad

thing as marry you: it 'ud ha' led to no happiness i' th' end.'

Hetty said nothing: she felt a revival of hope at the mention of a letter which Adam had not read. There would be something quite different in it from what he thought.

Adam took out the letter, but he held it in his hand still, while he said, in a tone of tender entreaty –

'Don't you bear me ill-will, Hetty, because I'm the means o' bringing you this pain. God knows I'd ha' borne a good deal worse for the sake o' sparing it you. And think — there's nobody but me knows about this; and I'll take care of you as if I was your brother. You're the same as ever to me, for I don't believe you've done any wrong knowingly.'

Hetty had laid her hand on the letter, but Adam did not loose it till he had done speaking. She took no notice of what he said — she had not listened; but when he loosed the letter, she put it into her pocket, without opening it, and then began to walk more quickly, as if she wanted to go in.

'You're in the right not to read it just yet,' said Adam. 'Read it when you're by yourself. But stay out a little bit longer, and let us call the children: you look so white and ill; your aunt may take notice of it.'

Hetty heard the warning. It recalled to her the necessity of rallying her native powers of concealment, which had half given way under the shock of Adam's words. And she had the letter in her pocket: she was sure there was comfort in that letter, in spite of Adam. She ran to find Totty, and soon reappeared with recovered colour, leading Totty, who was making a sour face, because she had been obliged to throw away an unripe apple that she had set her small teeth in.

'Hegh, Totty,' said Adam, 'come and ride on my shoulder – ever so high — you'll touch the tops o' the trees.'

What little child ever refused to be comforted by that glorious sense of being seized strongly and swung upward? I don't believe Ganymede[2] cried when the eagle carried him away, and perhaps deposited him on Jove's shoulder at the end. Totty smiled down complacently from her secure height, and pleasant was the sight to the mother's eyes, as she stood at the house door and saw Adam coming with his small burthen.

'Bless your sweet face, my pet,' she said, the mother's strong love filling her keen eyes with mildness, as Totty leaned forward and put out her arms. She had no eyes for Hetty at that moment, and only said, without looking at her, 'You go and draw some ale, Hetty: the gells are both at the cheese.'

After the ale had been drawn and her uncle's pipe lighted, there was Totty to be taken to bed, and brought down again in her night-gown, because she would cry instead of going to sleep. Then there was supper to be got ready, and Hetty must be continually in the way to give help. Adam stayed till he knew Mrs Poyser expected him to go, engaging her and her husband in talk as constantly as he could, for the sake of leaving Hetty more at ease. He lingered, because he wanted to see her safely through that evening, and he was delighted to find how much self-command she showed. He knew she had not had time to read the letter, but he did not know she was buoyed up by a secret hope that the letter would contradict everything he had said. It was hard work for him to leave her — hard to think that he should not know for days how she was bearing her trouble. But he must go at last, and all he could do was to press her hand gently as he said 'Good-bye', and hope she would take that as a sign that if his love could ever be a refuge for her, it was there the same as ever. How busy his thoughts were, as he walked home, in devising pitying excuses for her folly; in referring all her weakness to the sweet lovingness of her nature; in blaming Arthur, with less and less inclination to admit that *his* conduct night be extenuated too! His exasperation at Hetty's suffering — and also at the sense that she was possibly thrust for ever out of his own reach — deafened him to any plea for the miscalled friend who had wrought this misery. Adam was a clear-sighted, fair-minded man — a fine fellow, indeed, morally as well as physically. But if Aristides the Just[3] was ever in love and jealous, he was at that moment not perfectly magnanimous. And I cannot pretend that Adam, in these painful days, felt nothing but righteous indignation and loving pity. He was bitterly jealous; and in proportion as his love made him indulgent in his judgment of Hetty, the bitterness found a vent in his feeling towards Arthur.

'Her head was allays likely to be turned,' he thought, 'when a gentleman, with his fine manners, and fine clothes, and his white hands, and that way o' talking gentlefolks have, came about her, making up to her in a bold way, as a man couldn't do that was only her equal; and it's much if she'll ever like a common man now.' He could not help drawing his own hands out of his pocket, and looking at them — at the hard palms and the broken finger-nails. 'I'm a roughish fellow, altogether: I don't know, now I come to think on't, what there is much for a woman to like about me; and yet I might ha' got another wife easy enough, if I hadn't set my heart on her. But it's little matter what other women think about me, if she can't love me. She might ha' loved me, perhaps, as likely as any other man — there's nobody hereabouts as I'm afraid of, if *he* hadn't come between us; but now I shall belike be hateful to her because I'm so different to him. And yet there's no telling — she may turn round the other way, when she finds he's made light of her all the while. She may come to feel the vally[4] of a man as 'ud be thankful to be bound to her all his life. But I must put up

with it whichever way it is — I've only to be thankful it's been no worse: I am not th' only man that's got to do without much happiness i' this life. There's many a good bit o' work done with a sad heart. It's God's will, and that's enough for us: we shouldn't know better how things ought to be than He does, I reckon, if we was to spend our lives i' puzzling. But it 'ud ha' gone near to spoil my work for me, if I'd seen her brought to sorrow and shame, and through the man as I've always been proud to think on. Since I've been spared that, I've no right to grumble. When a man's got his limbs whole, he can bear a smart cut or two.'

As Adam was getting over a stile at this point in his reflections, he perceived a man walking along the field before him. He knew it was Seth, returning from an evening preaching, and made haste to overtake him.

'I thought thee'dst be at home before me,' he said, as Seth turned round to wait for him, 'for I'm later than usual tonight.'

'Well, I'm later too, for I got into talk, after meeting, with John Barnes, who has lately professed himself in a state of perfection,[5] and I'd a question to ask him about his experience. It's one o' them subjects that lead you further than y' expect – they don't lie along the straight road.'

They walked along together in silence two or three minutes. Adam was not inclined to enter into the subtleties of religious experience, but he *was* inclined to interchange a word or two of brotherly affection and confidence with Seth. That was a rare impulse in him, much as the brothers loved each other. They hardly ever spoke of personal matters, or uttered more than an allusion to their family troubles. Adam was by nature reserved in all matters of feeling, and Seth felt a certain timidity towards his more practical brother.

'Seth, lad,' Adam said, putting his arm on his brother's shoulder, 'hast heard anything from Dinah Morris since she went away?'

'Yes,' said Seth. 'She told me I might write her word after a while, how we went on, and how mother bore up under her trouble. So I wrote to her a fortnight ago, and told her about thee having a new employment, and how mother was more contented; and last Wednesday, when I called at the post at Treddles'on I found a letter from her. I think thee'dst perhaps like to read it; but I didna say anything about it, because thee'st seemed so full of other things. It's quite easy t' read — she writes wonderful for a woman.'

Seth had drawn the letter from his pocket and held it out to Adam, who said, as he took it –

'Ay, lad, I've got a tough load to carry j ust now — thee mustna take it ill if I'm a bit silenter and crustier nor usual. Trouble doesna make me care the less for thee. I know we shall stick together to the last.'

'I take nought ill o' thee, Adam: I know well enough what it means if Thee't a bit short wi' me now and then.'

'There's mother opening the door to look out for us,' said Adam, as they mounted the slope. 'She's been sitting i' the dark as usual. Well, Gyp, well! art glad to see me?'

Lisbeth went in again quickly and lighted a candle, for she had heard the welcome rustling of footsteps on the grass, before Gyp's joyful bark.

'Eh, my lads! th' hours war Ne'er so long sin' I war born as they'n been this blessed Sunday night. What can ye both ha' been doin' till this time?'

'Thee shouldstna sit i' the dark, mother,' said Adam; 'that makes the time seem longer.'

'Eh, what am I to do wi' burnin' candle of a Sunday, when there's On'y me, an' it's sin to do a bit o' knittin'? The daylight's long enough for me to stare i' th' booke as I canna read. It 'ud be a fine way o' shortenin' the time, to make it waste the good candle. But which on you's for ha'in' supper? Ye mun ayther be clemmed[6] or full, I should think, seein' what time o' night it is.'

'I'm hungry, mother,' said Seth, seating himself at the little table, which had been spread ever since it was light.

'I've had my supper,' said Adam. 'Here, Gyp,' he added, taking some cold potato from the table, and rubbing the rough grey head that looked up towards him.

'Thee needstna be gi'in' th' dog,' said Lisbeth: 'I'n fed him well a'ready. I'm not like to forget him, I reckon, when he's all o' thee I can get sight on.'

'Come, then, Gyp,' said Adam, 'we'll go to bed. Good-night, mother; I'm very tired.'

'What ails him, dost know?' Lisbeth said to Seth, when Adam was gone up-stairs. 'He's like as if he was struck for death this day or two — he's so cast down. I found him i' the shop this forenoon, arter thee wast gone, a-sittin' an' doin' nothin' — not so much as a booke afore him.'

'He's a deal o' work upon him just now, mother,' said Seth, 'and I think he's a bit troubled in his mind. Don't you take notice of it, because it hurts him when you do. Be as kind to him as you can, mother, and don't say anything to vex him.'

'Eh, what dost talk o' my vexin' him? an' what am I like to be but kind? I'll ma' him a kettle-cake for

breakfast i' the mornin'.'

Adam, meanwhile, was reading Dinah's letter by the light of his dip candle.

'DEAR BROTHER SETH — Your letter lay three days beyond my knowing of it at the Post, for I had not money enough by me to pay the carriage,[7] this being a time of great need and sickness here, with the rains that have fallen, as if the windows of heaven were opened again; and to lay by money, from day to day, in such a time, when there are so many in present need of all things, would be a want of trust like the laying up of the manna.[8]1 speak of this, because I would not have you think me slow to answer, or that I had small joy in your rejoicing at the worldly good that has befallen your brother Adam. The honour and love you bear him is nothing but meet, for God has given him great gifts, and he uses them as the patriarch Joseph did, who, when he was exalted to a place of power and trust, yet yearned with tenderness towards his parent and his younger brother.

'My heart is knit to your aged mother since it was granted me to be near her in the day of trouble. Speak to her of me, and tell her I often bear her in my thoughts at evening time, when I am sitting in the dim light as I did with her, and we held one another's hands, and I spoke the words of comfort that were given to me. Ah, that is a blessed time, isn't it, Seth, when the outward light is fading, and the body is a little wearied with its work and its labour. Then the inward light shines the brighter, and we have a deeper sense of resting on the Divine strength. I sit on my chair in the dark room and close my eyes, and it is as if I was out of the body and could feel no want for evermore. For then, the very hardship, and the sorrow, and the blindness, and the sin, I have beheld and been ready to weep over, — yea, all the anguish of the children of men, which sometimes wraps me round like sudden darkness — I can bear with a willing pain, as if I was sharing the Redeemer's cross. For I feel it, I feel it — infinite love is suffering too — yea, in the fulness of knowledge it suffers, it yearns, it mourns; and that is a blind self-seeking which wants to be freed from the sorrow wherewith the whole creation groaneth and travaileth. Surely it is not true blessedness to be free from sorrow, while there is sorrow and sin in the world: sorrow is then a part of love, and love does not seek to throw it off. It is not the spirit only that tells me this — I see it in the whole work and word of the gospel. Is there not pleading in heaven? Is not the Man of Sorrows[9] there in that crucified body wherewith he ascended? And is He not one with the Infinite Love itself — as our love is one with our sorrow?

'These thoughts have been much borne in on me of late, and I have seen with new clearness the meaning of those words, "If any man love me, let him take up my cross." I have heard this enlarged on as if it meant the troubles and persecutions we bring on ourselves by confessing Jesus. But surely that is a narrow thought. The true cross of the Redeemer was the sin and sorrow of this world — *that* was what lay heavy on his heart — and that is the cross we shall share with him, that is the cup we must drink of with him, if we would have any part in that Divine Love which is one with his sorrow.

'In my outward lot, which you ask about, I have all things and abound. I have had constant work in the mill, though some of the other hands have been turned off for a time; and my body is greatly strengthened, so that I feel little weariness after long walking and speaking. What you say about staying in your own country with your mother and brother shows me that you have a true guidance: your lot is appointed there by a clear showing, and to seek a greater blessing elsewhere would be like laying a false offering on the altar and expecting the fire from heaven to kindle it. My work and my joy are here among the hills, and I sometimes think I cling too much to my life among the people here, and should be rebellious if I was called away.

'I was thankful for your tidings about the dear friends at the Hall Farm; for though I sent them a letter, by my aunt's desire, after I came back from my sojourn among them, I have had no word from them. My aunt has not the pen of a ready writer, and the work of the house is sufficient for the day,[10] for she is weak in body. My heart cleaves to her and her children as the nearest of all to me in the flesh; yea, and to all in that house. I am carried away to them continually in my sleep, and often in the midst of work, and even of speech, the thought of them is borne in on me as if they were in need and trouble, which yet is dark to me. There may be some leading here;[11] but I wait to be taught. You say they are all well.

'We shall see each other again in the body, I trust, — though, it may be, not for a long while; for the brethren and sisters at Leeds are desirous to have me for a short space among them, when I have a door opened me again to leave Snowfield.

'Farewell, dear brother — and yet not farewell. For those children of God whom it has been granted to see each other face to face and to hold communion together, and to feel the same spirit working in both, can never more be sundered, though the hills may lie between. For their souls are enlarged for evermore by that union, and they bear one another about in their thoughts continually as it were a new strength. — Your faithful Sister and fellow-worker in Christ,

"DINAH MORRIS."

'I have not skill to write the words so small as you do, and my pen moves slow. And so I am straitened, and say but little of what is in my mind. Greet your mother for me with a kiss. She asked me to kiss her twice when we parted.'

Adam had refolded the letter, and was sitting meditatively with his head resting on his arm at the head of the bed, when Seth came up-stairs.

'Hast read the letter?' said Seth.

'Yes,' said Adam. 'I don't know what I should ha' thought of her and her letter if I'd never seen her: I daresay I should ha' thought a preaching woman hateful. But she's one as makes everything seem right she says and does, and I seemed to see her and hear her speaking when I read the letter. It's wonderful how I

remember her looks and her voice. She'd make thee rare and happy, Seth; she's just the woman for thee.'

'It's no use thinking o' that,' said Seth, despondingly. 'She spoke so firm, and she's not the woman to say one thing and mean another.'

'Nay, but her feelings may grow different. A woman may get to love by degrees — the best fire doesna flare up the soonest. I'd have thee go and see her by-and-by: I'd make it convenient for thee to be away three or four days, and it 'ud be no walk for thee — only between twenty and thirty mile.'

'I should like to see her again, whether or no, if she wouldna be displeased with me for going,' said Seth.

'She'll be none displeased,' said Adam, emphatically, getting up and throwing off his coat. 'It might be a great happiness to us all, if she'd have thee, for mother took to her so wonderful, and seemed so contented to be with her.'

'Ay,' said Seth, rather timidly, 'and Dinah's fond o' Hetty too; she thinks a deal about her.'

Adam made no reply to that, and no other word but 'goodnight' passed between them.

CHAPTER XXXI

In Hetty's Bed-Chamber

It was no longer light enough to go to bed without a candle, even in Mrs Poyser's early household, and Hetty carried one with her as she went up at last to her bedroom soon after Adam was gone and bolted the door behind her.

Now she would read her letter. It must — it must have comfort in it. How was Adam to know the truth? It was always likely he should say what he did say.

She set down the candle, and took out the letter. It had a faint scent of roses, which made her feel as if Arthur were close to her. She put it to her lips, and a rush of remembered sensations for a moment or two swept away all fear. But her heart began to flutter strangely, and her hands to tremble as she broke the seal. She read slowly; it was not easy for her to read a gentleman's handwriting,[1] though Arthur had taken pains to write plainly.

> 'DEAREST HETTY, — I have spoken truly when I have said that I loved you, and I shall never forget our love. I shall be your true friend as long as life lasts, and I hope to prove this to you in many ways. If I say anything to pain you in this letter, do not believe it is for want of love and tenderness towards you, for there is nothing I would not do for you, if I knew it to be really for your happiness. I cannot bear to think of my little Hetty shedding tears when I am not there to kiss them away; and if I followed only my own inclinations, I should be with her at this moment instead of writing. It is very hard for me to part from her — harder still for me to write words which may seem unkind, though they spring from the truest kindness.

'Dear, dear Hetty, sweet as our love has been to me, sweet as it would be to me for you to love me always, I feel that it would have been better for us both if we had never had that happiness, and that it is my duty to ask you to love me and care for me as little as you can. The fault has all been mine, for though I have been unable to resist the longing to be near you, I have felt all the while that your affection for me might cause you grief. I ought to have resisted my feelings. I should have done so, if I had been a better fellow than I am; but now, since the past cannot be altered, I am bound to save you from any evil that I have power to prevent. And I feel it would be a great evil for you if your affections continued so fixed on me that you could think of no other man who might be able to make you happier by his love than I ever can, and if you continued to look towards something in the future which cannot possibly happen. For, dear Hetty, if I were to do what you one day spoke of, and make you my wife, I should do what you yourself would come to feel was for your misery instead of your welfare. I know you can never be happy except by marrying a man in your own station; and if I were to marry you now, I should only be adding to any wrong I have done, besides offending against my duty in the other relations of life. You know nothing, dear Hetty, of the world in which I must always live, and you would soon begin to dislike me, because there would be so little in which we should be alike.

'And since I cannot marry you, we must part — we must try not to feel like lovers any more. I am miserable while I say this, but nothing else can be. Be angry with me, my sweet one, I deserve it; but do not believe that I shall not always care for you — always be grateful to you — always remember my Hetty; and if any trouble should come that we do not now foresee, trust in me to do everything that lies in my power.

'I have told you where you are to direct a letter to, if you want to write, but I put it down below lest you should have forgotten. Do not write unless there is something I can really do for you; for, dear Hetty, we must try to think of each other as little as we can. Forgive me, and try to forget everything about me, except that I shall be, as long as I live, your affectionate friend,

ARTHUR DONNITHORNE.'

Slowly Hetty had read this letter; and when she looked up from it there was the reflection of a blanched face in the old dim glass — a white marble face with rounded childish forms, but with something sadder than a child's pain in it. Hetty did not see the face — she saw nothing — she only felt that she was cold and sick and trembling. The letter shook and rustled in her hand. She laid it down. It was a horrible sensation — this cold and trembling: it swept away the very ideas that produced it, and Hetty got up to reach a warm cloak from her clothes-press, wrapped it round her, and sat as if she were thinking of nothing but getting warm. Presently she took up the letter with a firmer hand, and began to read it through again. The tears

came this time — great rushing tears, that blinded her and blotched the paper. She felt nothing but that Arthur was cruel-cruel to write so, cruel not to marry her. Reasons why he could not marry her had no existence for her mind; how could she believe in any misery that could come to her from the fulfilment of all she had been longing for and dreaming of? She had not the ideas that could make up the notion of that misery.

As she threw down the letter again, she caught sight of her face in the glass; it was reddened now, and wet with tears; it was almost like a companion that she might complain to — that would pity her. She leaned forward on her elbows, and looked into those dark overflooding eyes, and at that quivering mouth, and saw how the tears came thicker and thicker, and how the mouth became convulsed with sobs.

The shattering of all her little dream-world, the crushing blow on her newborn passion, afflicted her pleasure-craving nature with an overpowering pain that annihilated all impulse to resistance, and suspended her anger. She sat sobbing till the candle went out, and then, wearied, aching, stupefied with crying, threw herself on the bed without undressing, and went to sleep.

There was a feeble dawn in the room when Hetty awoke, a little after four o'clock, with a sense of dull misery, the cause of which broke upon her gradually, as she began to discern the objects round her in the dim light. And then came the frightening thought that she had to conceal her misery, as well as to bear it, in this dreary daylight that was coming. She could lie no longer: she got up and went towards the table: there lay the letter; she opened her treasure-drawer: there lay the earrings and the locket — the signs of all her short happiness — the signs of the life-long dreariness that was to follow it. Looking at the little trinkets which she had once eyed and fingered so fondly as the earnest of her future paradise of finery, she lived back in the moments when they had been given to her with such tender caresses, such strangely pretty words, such glowing looks, which filled her with a bewildering delicious surprise — they were so much sweeter than she had thought anything could be. And the Arthur who had spoken to her and looked at her in this way, who was present with her now — whose arm she felt round her, his cheek against hers, his very breath upon her – was the cruel, cruel Arthur who had written that letter: — that letter which she snatched and crushed and then opened again, that she might read it once more. The half-benumbed mental condition which was the effect of the last night's violent crying, made it necessary to her to look again and see if her wretched thoughts were actually true — if the letter was really so cruel. She had to hold it close to the window, else she could not have read it by the faint light. Yes! it was worse — it was more cruel. She crushed it up again in anger. She hated the writer of that letter — hated him for the very reason that she hung upon him with all her love — all the girlish passion and vanity that made up her love.

She had no tears this morning. She had wept them all away last night, and now she felt that dry-eyed morning misery, which is worse than the first shock, because it has the future in it as well as the present. Every morning to come, as far as her imagination could stretch, she would have to get up and feel that the day would have no joy for her. For there is no despair so absolute as that which comes with the first moments of our first great sorrow, when we have not yet known what it is to have suffered and be healed, to have despaired and to have recovered hope. As Hetty began languidly to take off the clothes she had worn all the night, that she might wash herself and brush her hair, she had a sickening sense that her life would go on in this way: she should always be doing things she had no pleasure in, getting up to the old tasks of work, seeing people she cared nothing about, going to church, and to Treddleston, and to tea with Mrs Best, and carrying no happy thought with her. For her short poisonous delights had spoiled for ever all the little joys that had once made the sweetness of her life — the new frock ready for Treddleston fair, the party at Mr Britton's at Broxton wake, the beaux that she would say 'No' to for a long while, and the prospect of the wedding that was to come at last when she would have a silk gown and a great many clothes all at once. These things were all flat and dreary to her now: everything would be a weariness: and she would carry about for ever a hopeless thirst and longing.

She paused in the midst of her languid undressing, and leaned against the dark old clothes-press. Her neck and arms were bare, her hair hung down in delicate rings; and they were just as beautiful as they were that night two months ago, when she walked up and down this bed-chamber glowing with vanity and hope. She was not thinking of her neck and arms now; even her own beauty was indifferent to her. Her eyes wandered sadly over the dull old chamber, and then looked out vacantly towards the growing dawn. Did a remembrance of Dinah come across her mind? — of her foreboding words, which had made her angry? — of Dinah's affectionate entreaty to think of her as a friend in trouble? No, the impression had been too slight to recur. Any affection or comfort Dinah could have given her would have been as indifferent to Hetty this morning as everything else was except her bruised passion. She was only thinking she could never stay here and go on with the old life — she could better bear something quite new than sinking back into the old everyday round. She would like to run away that very morning, and never see any of the old faces again. But Hetty's was not a nature to face difficulties — to dare to loose her hold on the familiar, and rush blindly

on some unknown condition. Hers was a luxurious and vain nature, not a passionate one; and if she were ever to take any violent measure, she must be urged to it by the desperation of terror. There was not much room for her thoughts to travel in the narrow circle of her imagination, and she soon fixed on the one thing she would do to get away from her old life: she would ask her uncle to let her go to be a lady's-maid. Miss Lydia's maid would help her to get a situation, if she knew Hetty had her uncle's leave.

When she had thought of this, she fastened up her hair and began to wash: it seemed more possible to her to go down-stairs and try to behave as usual. She would ask her uncle this very day. On Hetty's blooming health it would take a great deal of such mental suffering as hers to leave any deep impress; and when she was dressed as neatly as usual in her working-dress, with her hair tucked up under her little cap, an indifferent observer would have been more struck with the young roundness of her cheek and neck, and the darkness of her eyes and eyelashes, than with any signs of sadness about her. But when she took up the crushed letter and put it in her drawer, that she might lock it out of sight, hard smarting tears, having no relief in them as the great drops had that fell last night, forced their way into her eyes. She wiped them away quickly: she must not cry in the day-time: nobody should find out how miserable she was, nobody should know she was disappointed about anything; and the thought that the eyes of her aunt and uncle would be upon her, gave her the self-command which often accompanies a great dread. For Hetty looked out from her secret misery towards the possibility of their ever knowing what had happened, as the sick and weary prisoner might think of the possible pillory. They would think her conduct shameful; and shame was torture. That was poor little Hetty's conscience.

So she locked up her drawer and went away to her early work.

In the evening, when Mr Poyser was smoking his pipe, and his good-nature was therefore at its superlative moment, Hetty seized the opportunity of her aunt's absence to say –

'Uncle, I wish you'd let me go for a lady's-maid.'

Mr Poyser took the pipe from his mouth, and looked at Hetty in mild surprise for some moments. She was sewing, and went on with her work industriously.

'Why, what's put that into your head, my wench?' he said at last, after he had given one conservative puff.

'I should like it — I should like it better than farm-work.'

'Nay, nay; you fancy so because you donna know it, my wench. It wouldn't be half so good for your health, nor for your luck i' life. I'd like you to stay wi' us till you've got a good husband: you're my own niece, and I wouldn't have you go to service, though it was a gentleman's house, as long as I've got a home for you.'

Mr Poyser paused, and puffed away at his pipe.

'I like the needlework,' said Hetty, 'and I should get good wages.'

'Has your aunt been a bit sharp wi' you?' said Mr Poyser, not noticing Hetty's further argument. 'You mustna mind that, my wench — she does it for your good. She wishes you well; an' there isn't many aunts as are no kin to you 'ud ha' done by you as she has.'

'No, it isn't my aunt,' said Hetty, 'but I should like the work better.'

'It was all very well for you to learn the work a bit — an' I gev my consent to that fast enough, sin' Mrs Pomfret was willing to teach you. For if anything was t' happen, it's well to know how to turn your hand to different sorts o' things. But I niver meant you to go to service, my wench; my family's ate their own bread and cheese as fur back as anybody knows, hanna they, father? You wouldna like your grandchild to take wage?'

'Na-a-y,' said old Martin, with an elongation of the word, meant to make it bitter as well as negative, while he leaned forward and looked down on the floor. 'But the wench takes arter her mother. I'd hard work t' hould *her* in, an' she married i' spite o' me — a feller wi' On'y two head o' stock when there should ha' been ten on's farm — she might well die o' th' inflammation afore she war thirty.'

It was seldom the old man made so long a speech; but his son's question had fallen like a bit of dry fuel on the embers of a long unextinguished resentment, which had always made the grandfather more indifferent to Hetty than to his son's children. Her mother's fortune had been spent by that good-for-nought Sorrel, and Hetty had Sorrel's blood in her veins.

'Poor thing, poor thing!' said Martin the younger, who was sorry to have provoked this retrospective harshness. 'She'd but bad luck. But Hetty's got as good a chanche o' getting a solid, sober husband as any gell i' this country.'

After throwing out this pregnant hint, Mr Poyser recurred to his pipe and his silence, looking at Hetty to see if she did not give some sign of having renounced her ill-advised wish. But instead of that, Hetty, in spite of herself, began to cry, half out of ill-temper at the denial, half out of the day's repressed sadness.

‘Hegh, hegh!’ said Mr Poyser, meaning to check her playfully, ‘don’t let’s have any crying. Crying’s for them as ha’ got no home, not for them as want to get rid o’ one. What dost think?’ he continued to his wife, who now came back into the house-place, knitting with fierce rapidity, as if that movement were a necessary function, like the twittering of a crab’s antennae.

‘Think? — why, I think we shall have the fowl stole before we are much older, wi’ that gell forgetting to lock the pens up o’ nights. What’s the matter now, Hetty? What are you crying at?’

‘Why, she’s been wanting to go for a lady’s-maid,’ said Mr Poyser. ‘I tell her we can do better for her nor that.’

‘I thought she’d got some maggot in her head, she’s gone about wi’ her mouth buttoned up so all day. It’s all wi’ going so among them servants at the Chase, as we war fools for letting her. She thinks it ’ud be a finer life than being wi’ them as are akin to her, and ha’ brought her up sin’ she war no bigger nor Marty. She thinks there’s nothing belongs to being a lady’s-maid, but wearing finer clothes nor she was born to, I’ll be bound. It’s what rag she can get to stick on her as she’s thinking on from morning till night; as I often ask her if she wouldn’t like to be the mawkin i’ the field, for then she’d be made o’ rags inside and out. I’ll never gi’ my consent to her going for a lady’s-maid, while she’s got good friends to take care on her till she’s married to somebody better nor one o’ them valets, as is neither a common man nor a gentleman, an’ must live on the fat o’ the land, an’s like enough to stick his hands under his coat tails and expect his wife to work for him.’

‘Ay, ay,’ said Mr Poyser, ‘we must have a better husband for her nor that, and there’s better at hand. Come, my wench, give over crying, and get to bed. I’ll do better for you nor letting you go for a lady’s-maid. Let’s hear no more on’t.’

When Hetty was gone up-stairs he said –

‘I canna make it out as she should want to go away, for I thought she’d got a mind t’ Adam Bede. She’s looked like it o’ late.’

‘Eh, there’s no knowing what she’s got a liking to, for things take no more hold on her than if she was a dried pea. I believe that gell Molly — as is aggravatin’ enough, for the matter o’ that — but I believe she’d care more about leaving us and the children, for all she’s been here but a year come Michaelmas, nor Hetty would. But she’s got this notion o’ being a lady’s-maid wi’ going among them servants — we might ha’ known what it ’ud lead to when we let her go to learn the fine work. But I’ll put a stop to it pretty quick.’

‘Thee’dst be sorry to part wi’ her, if it wasn’t for her good,’ said Mr Poyser. ‘She’s useful to thee i’ the work.’

‘Sorry? yes; I’m fonder on her nor she deserves — a little hard-hearted hussy, wanting to leave us i’ that way. I can’t ha’ had her about me these seven year, I reckon, and done for her, and taught her everything, wi’out caring about her. An’ here I’m having linen spun, an’ thinking all the while it’ll make sheeting and table-clothing for her when she’s married, an’ she’ll live i’ the parish wi’ us, and never go out of our sights – like a fool as I am for thinking aught about her, as is no better nor a cherry wi’ a hard stone inside it.’

‘Nay, nay, thee mustna make much of a trifle,’ said Mr Poyser, soothingly. ‘She’s fond on us, I’ll be bound; but she’s young, an’ gets things in her head as she can’t rightly give account on. Them young fillies ’ull run away often wi’out knowing why.’

Her uncle’s answers, however, had had another effect on Hetty besides that of disappointing her and making her cry. She knew quite well whom he had in his mind in his allusions to marriage, and to a sober, solid husband; and when she was in her bedroom again, the possibility of her marrying Adam presented itself to her in a new light. In a mind where no strong sympathies are at work, where there is no supreme sense of right to which the agitated nature can cling and steady itself to quiet endurance, one of the first results of sorrow is a desperate vague clutching after any deed that will change the actual condition. Poor Hetty’s vision of consequences, at no time more than a narrow fantastic calculation of her own probable pleasures and pains, was now quite shut out by reckless irritation under present suffering, and she was ready for one of those convulsive, motiveless actions by which wretched men and women leap from a temporary sorrow into a life-long misery.

Why should she not marry Adam? She did not care what she did, so that it made some change in her life. She felt confident that he would still want to marry her, and any further thought about Adam’s happiness in the matter had never yet visited her.

‘Strange!’ perhaps you will say, ‘this rush of impulse towards a course that might have seemed the most repugnant to her present state of mind, and in only the second night of her sadness!’

Yes, the actions of a little trivial soul like Hetty’s, struggling amidst the serious, sad destinies of a human being *are* strange. So are the motions of a little vessel without ballast tossed about on a stormy sea. How pretty it looked with its particoloured sail in the sunlight, moored in the quiet bay!

‘Let that man bear the loss who loosed it from its moorings.’[2]
But that will not save the vessel — the pretty thing that might have been a lasting joy.

CHAPTER XXXII

Mrs Poyser 'Has Her Say Out'

The next Saturday evening there was much excited discussion at the Donnithorne Arms concerning an incident which had occurred that very day — no less than a second appearance of the smart man in top-boots, said by some to be a mere farmer in treaty for the Chase Farm, by others to be the future steward; but by Mr Casson himself, the personal witness to the stranger's visit, pronounced contemptuously to be nothing better than a bailiff, such as Satchell had been before him. No one had thought of denying Mr Casson's testimony to the fact that he had seen the stranger, nevertheless he proffered various corroborating circumstances.

'I see him myself,' he said; 'I see him coming along by the Crab-tree meadow on a bald-faced hoss. I'd just been t' hev a pint — it was half after ten i' the forenoon, when I hev my pint as reg'lar as the clock — and I says to Knowles, as druv up with his waggon, "You'll get a bit o' barley to-day, Knowles," I says, "if you look about you"; and then I went round by the rick-yard, and towart the Treddles'on road; and just as I come up by the big ash-tree, I see the man i' top-boots coming along on a bald-faced hoss — I wish I may never stir if I didn't. And I stood still till he come up, and I says, "Good morning, sir," I says, for I wanted to hear the turn of his tongue, as I might know whether he was a this-country-man; so I says, "Good morning, sir: it'll 'old hup for the barley this morning, I think. There'll be a bit got hin, if we've good luck." And he says, "Eh, ye may be raight, there's no tallin'," he says; and I knowed by that' — here Mr Casson gave a wink — 'as he didn't come from a hundred mile off. I daresay he'd think me a hodd talker, as you Loamshire folks allays does hany one as talks the right language.'

'The right language!' said Bartle Massey, contemptuously. 'You're about as near the right language as a pig's squeaking is like a tune played on a key-bugle.'

'Well, I don't know,' answered Mr Casson, with an angry smile. 'I should think a man as has lived among the gentry from a boy, is likely to know what's the right language pretty nigh as well as a schoolmaster.'

'Ay, ay, man,' said Bartle, with a tone of sarcastic consolation, 'you talk the right language for *you.* When Mike Holdsworth's goat says ba-a-a, it's all right — it 'ud be unnatural for it to make any other noise.'

The rest of the party being Loamshire men, Mr Casson had the laugh strongly against him, and wisely fell back on the previous question, which, far from being exhausted in a single evening, was renewed in the churchyard, before service, the next day, with the fresh interest conferred on all news when there is a fresh person to hear it; and that fresh hearer was Martin Poyser, who, as his wife said, 'never went boozin' with that set at Casson's, a-sittin' soakin'-in drink, and looking as wise as a lot o' cod-fish wi' red faces'.

It was probably owing to the conversation she had had with her husband on their way from church, concerning this problematic stranger, that Mrs Poyser's thoughts immediately reverted to him when, a day or two afterwards, as she was standing at the house-door with her knitting, in that eager leisure which came to her when the afternoon cleaning was done, she saw the old Squire enter the yard on his black pony, followed by John the groom. She always cited it afterwards as a case of prevision, which really had something more in it than her own remarkable penetration, that the moment she set eyes on the Squire, she said to herself, 'I shouldna wonder if he's come about that man as is a-going to take the Chase Farm, wanting Poyser to do something for him without pay. But Poyser's a fool if he does.'

Something unwonted must clearly be in the wind, for the old Squire's visits to his tenantry were rare; and though Mrs Poyser had during the last twelvemonth recited many imaginary speeches, meaning even more than met the ear, which she was quite determined to make to him the next time he appeared within the gates of the Hall Farm, the speeches had always remained imaginary.

'Good-day, Mrs Poyser,' said the old Squire, peering at her with his short-sighted eyes — a mode of looking at her which, as Mrs Poyser observed, 'allays aggravated her: it was as if you was a insect, and he was going to dab his finger-nail on you.'

However, she said, 'Your servant, sir', and curtsied with an air of perfect deference as she advanced towards him: she was not the woman to misbehave towards her betters, and fly in the face of the catechism,[1] without severe provocation.

'Is your husband at home, Mrs Poyser?'

‘Yes, sir; he’s only i’ the rick-yard. I’ll send for him in a minute, if you’ll please to get down and step in.’

‘Thank you; I will do so. I want to consult him about a little matter; but you are quite as much concerned in it, if not more. I must have your opinion too.’

‘Hetty, run and tell your uncle to come in,’ said Mrs Poyser, as they entered the house, and the old gentleman bowed low in answer to Hetty’s curtsy; while Totty, conscious of a pinafore stained with gooseberry jam, stood hiding her face against the clock, and peeping round furtively.

‘What a fine old kitchen this is!’ said Mr Donnithorne, looking round admiringly. He always spoke in the same deliberate, well-chiselled, polite way, whether his words were sugary or venomous. ‘And you keep it so exquisitely clean, Mrs Poyser. I like these premises, do you know, beyond any on the estate.’

‘Well, sir, since you’re fond of ’em, I should be glad if you’d let a bit o’ repairs be done to ’em, for the boarding’s i’ that state, as we’re like to be eaten up wi’ rats and mice; and the cellar, you may stan’ up to your knees i’ water in’t, if you like to go down; but perhaps you’d rather believe my words. Won’t you please to sit down, sir?’

‘Not yet; I must see your dairy. I have not seen it for years, and I hear on all hands about your fine cheese and butter,’ said the Squire, looking politely unconscious that there could be any question on which he and Mrs Poyser might happen to disagree. ‘I think I see the door open, there: you must not be surprised if I cast a covetous eye on your cream and butter. I don’t expect that Mrs Satchell’s cream and butter will bear comparison with yours.’

‘I can’t say, sir, I’m sure. It’s seldom I see other folks’s butter, though there’s some on it as one’s no need to see — the smell’s enough.’

‘Ah, now this I like,’ said Mr Donnithorne, looking round at the damp temple of cleanliness, but keeping near the door. ‘I’m sure I should like my breakfast better if I knew the butter and cream came from this dairy. Thank you, that really is a pleasant sight. Unfortunately, my slight tendency to rheumatism makes me afraid of damp: I’ll sit down in your comfortable kitchen. Ah, Poyser, how do you do? In the midst of business, I see, as usual. I’ve been looking at your wife’s beautiful dairy — the best manager in the parish, is she not?’

Mr Poyser had just entered in shirt-sleeves and open waistcoat, with a face a shade redder than usual, from the exertion of ‘pitching’.[2] As he stood, red, rotund, and radiant, before the small, wiry, cool, old gentleman, he looked like a prize apple by the side of a withered crab.[3]

‘Will you please to take this chair, sir?’ he said, lifting his father’s arm-chair forward a little: ‘you’ll find it easy.’

‘No, thank you, I never sit in easy-chairs,’ said the old gentleman, seating himself on a small chair near the door. ‘Do you know, Mrs Poyser — sit down, pray, both of you — I’ve been far from contented, for some time, with Mrs Satchell’s dairy management. I think she has not a good method, as you have.’

‘Indeed, sir, I can’t speak to that,’ said Mrs Poyser, in a hard voice, rolling and unrolling her knitting, and looking icily out of the window, as she continued to stand opposite the Squire. Poyser might sit down if he liked, she thought: *she* wasn’t going to sit down, as if she’d give in to any such smooth-tongued palaver.[4] Mr Poyser, who looked and felt the reverse of icy, did sit down in his three-cornered chair.

‘And now, Poyser, as Satchell is laid up, I am intending to let the Chase Farm to a respectable tenant. I’m tired of having a farm on my own hands — nothing is made the best of in such cases, as you know. A satisfactory bailiff is hard to find; and I think you and I, Poyser, and your excellent wife here, can enter into a little arrangement in consequence, which will be to our mutual advantage.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Poyser, with a good-natured blankness of imagination as to the nature of the arrangement.

‘If I’m called upon to speak, sir,’ said Mrs Poyser, after glancing at her husband with pity at his softness, ‘you know better than me; but I don’t see what the Chase Farm is t’ us – we’ve cumber enough wi’ our own farm. Not but what I’m glad to hear o’ anybody respectable coming into the parish: there’s some as ha’ been brought in as hasn’t been looked on i’ that character.’

‘You’re likely to find Mr Thurle an excellent neighbour, I assure you: such a one as you will feel glad to have accommodated by the little plan I’m going to mention; especially as I hope you will find it as much to your own advantage as his.’

‘Indeed, sir, if it’s anything to our advantage, it’ll be the first offer o’ the sort I’ve heared on. It’s them as take advantage that get advantage i’ this world, *I* think: folks have to wait long enough afore it’s brought to ’em.’

‘The fact is, Poyser,’ said the Squire, ignoring Mrs Poyser’s theory of worldly prosperity, ‘there is too much dairy land, and too little plough land, on the Chase Farm, to suit Thurle’s purpose — indeed, he will only take the farm on condition of some change in it: his wife, it appears, is not a clever dairy-woman, like yours. Now, the plan I’m thinking of is to effect a little exchange. If you were to have the Hollow Pastures,

you might increase your dairy, which must be so profitable under your wife's management; and I should request you, Mrs Poyser, to supply my house with milk, cream, and butter at the market prices. On the other hand, Poyser, you might let Thurle have the Lower and Upper Ridges, which really, with our wet seasons, would be a good riddance for you. There is much less risk in dairy land than corn land.'

Mr Poyser was leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees, his head on one side, and his mouth screwed up — apparently absorbed in making the tips of his fingers meet so as to represent with perfect accuracy the ribs of a ship. He was much too acute a man not to see through the whole business, and to foresee perfectly what would be his wife's view of the subject; but he disliked giving unpleasant answers: unless it was on a point of farming practice, he would rather give up than have a quarrel, any day; and, after all, it mattered more to his wife than to him. So, after a few moments' silence, he looked up at her and said mildly. 'What dost say?'

Mrs Poyser had had her eyes fixed on her husband with cold severity during his silence, but now she turned away her head with a toss, looked icily at the opposite roof of the cow-shed, and spearing her knitting together with the loose pin, held it firmly between her clasped hands.

'Say? Why, I say you may do as you like about giving up any o' your corn land afore your lease is up, which it won't be for a year come next Michaelmas, but I'll not consent to take more dairy work into my hands, either for love or money; and there's nayther love nor money here, as I can see, On'y other folks's love o' theirselves, and the money as is to go into other folks's pockets. I know there's them as is born t' own the land, and them as is born to sweat on't' — here Mrs Poyser paused to gasp a little – 'and I know it's christened folks's duty to submit to their betters as fur as flesh and blood 'ull bear it; but I'll not make a martyr o' myself, and wear myself to skin and bone, and worret myself as if I was a churn wi' butter a-coming in't, for no landlord in England, not if he was King George himself.'

'No, no, my dear Mrs Poyser, certainly not,' said the Squire, still confident in his own powers of persuasion, 'you must not overwork yourself; but don't you think your work will rather be lessened than increased in this way? There is so much milk required at the Abbey, that you will have little increase of cheese and butter making from the addition to your dairy; and I believe selling the milk is the most profitable way of disposing of dairy produce, is it not?'

'Ay, that's true,' said Mr Poyser, unable to repress an opinion on a question of farming profits, and forgetting that it was not in this case a purely abstract question.

'I daresay,' said Mrs Poyser bitterly, turning her head halfway towards her husband, and looking at the vacant arm-chair — 'I daresay it's true for men as sit i' th' chimney-corner and make believe as everything's cut wi' ins an' outs to fit int' everything else. If you could make a pudding wi' thinking o' the batter, it 'ud be easy getting dinner. How do I know whether the milk 'ull be wanted constant? What's to make me sure as the house won't be put o' board wage[5] afore we're many months older, and then I may have to lie awake o' nights wi' twenty gallons o' milk on my mind — and Dingall 'ull take no more butter, let alone paying for it; and we must fat pigs till we're obliged to beg the butcher on our knees to buy 'em, and lose half of 'em wi' the measles. And there's the fetching and carrying, as 'ud be welly half a day's work for a man an' hoss — *that's* to be took out o' the profits, I reckon? But there's folks 'ud hold a sieve under the pump and expect to carry away the water.'

'That difficulty — about the fetching and carrying — you will not have, Mrs Poyser,' said the Squire, who thought that this entrance into particulars indicated a distant inclination to compromise on Mrs Poyser's part — 'Bethell will do that regularly with the cart and pony.'

'Oh, sir, begging your pardon, I've never been used t' having gentlefolks's servants coming about my back places, a-making love to both the gells at once, and keeping 'em with their hands on their hips listening to all manner o' gossip when they should be down on their knees a-scouring. If we're to go to ruin, it shanna be wi' having our back kitchen turned into a public.'

'Well, Poyser,' said the Squire, shifting his tactics, and looking as if he thought Mrs Poyser had suddenly withdrawn from the proceedings and left the room, 'you can turn the Hollows into feeding-land. I can easily make another arrangement about supplying my house. And I shall not forget your readiness to accommodate your landlord as well as a neighbour. I know you will be glad to have your lease renewed for three years when the present one expires; otherwise, I daresay Thurle, who is a man of some capital, would be glad to take both the farms, as they could be worked so well together. But I don't want to part with an old tenant like you.'

To be thrust out of the discussion in this way would have been enough to complete Mrs Poyser's exasperation, even without the final threat. Her husband, really alarmed at the possibility of their leaving the old place where he had been bred and born — for he believed the old Squire had small spite enough for anything — was beginning a mild remonstrance explanatory of the inconvenience he should find in having

to buy and sell more stock, with –

'Well, sir, I think as it's rether hard'… when Mrs Poyser burst in with the desperate determination to have her say out this once, though it were to rain notices to quit, and the only shelter were the workhouse.

'Then, sir, if I may speak — as, for all I'm a woman, and there's folks as thinks a woman's fool enough to stan' by an' look on while the men sign her soul away, I've a right to speak, for I make one quarter o' the rent, and save another quarter – I say, if Mr Thurle's so ready to take farms under you, it's a pity but what he should take this, and see if he likes to live in a house wi' all the plagues o' Egypt[6] in't — wi' the cellar full o' water, and frogs and toads hoppin' up the steps by dozens – and the floors rotten, and the rats and mice gnawing every bit o' cheese, and runnin' over our heads as we lie i' bed till we expect 'em to eat us up alive — as it's a mercy they hanna eat the children long ago. I should like to see if there's another tenant besides Poyser as 'ud put up wi' never having a bit o' repairs done till a place tumbles down — and not then, On'y wi' begging and praying, and having to pay half — and being strung up wi' the rent as it's much if he gets enough out o' the land to pay, for all he's put his own money into the ground beforehand. See if you'll get a stranger to lead such a life here as that: a maggot must be born i' the rotten cheese to like it, I reckon. You may run away from my words, sir,' continued Mrs Poyser, following the old Squire beyond the door — for after the first moments of stunned surprise he had got up, and, waving his hand towards her with a smile, had walked out towards his pony. But it was impossible for him to get away immediately, for John was walking the pony up and down the yard, and was some distance from the causeway when his master beckoned.

'You may run away from my words, sir, and you may go spinnin' underhand ways o' doing us a mischief, for you've got Old Harry to your friend, though nobody else is, but I tell you for once as we're not dumb creatures to be abused and made money on by them as ha' got the lash i' their hands, for want o' knowing how t' undo the tackle.[7] An' if I'm the only one as speaks my mind, there's plenty o' the same way o' thinking i' this parish and the next to 't, for your name's no better than a brimstone match in everybody's nose — if it isna two-three old folks as you think o' saving your soul by giving 'em a bit o' flannel and a drop o' porridge.[8] An' you may be right i' thinking it'll take but little to save your soul, for it'll be the smallest savin' y' iver made, wi' all your scrapin'.'

There are occasions on which two servant-girls and a waggoner may be a formidable audience, and as the Squire rode away on his black pony, even the gift of short-sightedness did not prevent him from being aware that Molly and Nancy and Tim were grinning not far from him. Perhaps he suspected that sour old John was grinning behind him — which was also the fact. Meanwhile the bull-dog, the black-and-tan terrier, Alick's sheep-dog, and the gander hissing at a safe distance from the pony's heels, carried out the idea of Mrs Poyser's solo in an impressive quartett.

Mrs Poyser, however, had no sooner seen the pony move off than she turned round, gave the two hilarious damsels a look which drove them into the back kitchen, and, unspearing her knitting, began to knit again with her usual rapidity, as she re-entered the house.

'Thee'st done it now,' said Mr Poyser, a little alarmed and uneasy, but not without some triumphant amusement at his wife's outbreak.

'Yes, I know I've done it,' said Mrs Poyser; 'but I've had my say out, and I shall be th' easier for't all my life. There's no pleasure i' living, if you're to be corked up for ever, and only dribble your mind out by the sly, like a leaky barrel. I shan't repent saying what I think, if I live to be as old as th' old Squire; and there's little likelihoods — for it seems as if them as aren't wanted here are th' only folks as aren't wanted i' th' other world.'

'But thee wutna like moving from th' old place this Michaelmas twelvemonth,' said Mr Poyser, 'and going into a strange parish, where thee know'st nobody. It'll be hard upon us both, and upo' father too.'

'Eh, it's no use worreting; there's plenty o' things may happen between this and Michaelmas twelvemonth. The Captain may be master afore then, for what we know,' said Mrs Poyser, inclined to take an unusually hopeful view of an embarrassment which had been brought about by her own merit, and not by other people's fault.

'*I'm* none for worreting,' said Mr Poyser, rising from his three-cornered chair, and walking slowly towards the door; 'but I should be loath to leave the old place, and the parish where I was bred and born, and father afore me. We should leave our roots behind us, I doubt, and niver thrive again.'

CHAPTER XXXIII

More Links

The barley was all carried at last, and the harvest suppers[1] went by without waiting for the dismal black crop of beans. The apples and nuts were gathered and stored; the scent of whey departed from the farmhouses, and the scent of brewing came in its stead. The woods behind the Chase, and all the hedgerow trees, took on a solemn splendour under the dark low-hanging skies. Michaelmas was come, with its fragrant basketfuls of purple damsons, and its paler purple daisies, and its lads and lasses leaving or seeking service, and winding along between the yellow hedges, with their bundles under their arms. But though Michaelmas was come, Mr Thurle, that desirable tenant, did not come to the Chase Farm, and the old Squire, after all, had been obliged to put in a new bailiff. It was known throughout the two parishes that the Squire's plan had been frustrated because the Poysers had refused to be 'put upon', and Mrs Poyser's outbreak was discussed in all the farmhouses with a zest which was only heightened by frequent repetition. The news that 'Bony' was come back from Egypt was comparatively insipid, and the repulse of the French in Italy[2] was nothing to Mrs Poyser's repulse of the old Squire. Mr Irwine had heard a version of it in every parishioner's house, with the one exception of the Chase. But since he had always, with marvellous skill, avoided any quarrel with Mr Donnithorne, he could not allow himself the pleasure of laughing at the old gentleman's discomfiture with any one besides his mother, who declared that if she were rich she should like to allow Mrs Poyser a pension for life, and wanted to invite her to the parsonage, that she might hear an account of the scene from Mrs Poyser's own lips.

'No, no, mother,' said Mr Irwine; 'it was a little bit of irregular justice on Mrs Poyser's part, but a magistrate like me must not countenance irregular justice. There must be no report spread that I have taken notice of the quarrel, else I shall lose the little good influence I have over the old man.'

'Well, I like that woman even better than her cream-cheeses,' said Mrs Irwine. 'She has the spirit of three men, with that pale face of hers; and she says such sharp things too.'

'Sharp! yes, her tongue is like a new-set razor. She's quite original in her talk, too; one of those untaught wits that help to stock a country with proverbs. I told you that capital thing I heard her say about Craig — that he was like a cock who thought the sun had risen to hear him crow. Now that's an Æsop's fable[3] in a sentence.'

'But it will be a bad business if the old gentleman turns them out of the farm next Michaelmas, eh?' said Mrs Irwine.

'Oh, that must not be; and Poyser is such a good tenant, that Donnithorne is likely to think twice, and digest his spleen rather than turn them out. But if he should give them notice at Lady-day, Arthur and I must move heaven and earth to mollify him. Such old parishioners as they are must not go.'

'Ah, there's no knowing what may happen before Lady-day,' said Mrs Irwine. 'It struck me on Arthur's birthday that the old man was a little shaken: he's eighty-three, you know. It's really an unconscionable age. It's only women who have a right to live as long as that.'

'When they've got old-bachelor sons who would be forlorn without them,' said Mr Irwine, laughing, and kissing his mother's hand.

Mrs Poyser, too, met her husband's occasional forebodings of a notice to quit with 'There's no knowing what may happen before Lady-day': — one of those undeniable general propositions which are usually intended to convey a particular meaning very far from undeniable. But it is really too hard upon human nature that it should be held a criminal offence to imagine the death even of the king when he is turned eighty-three. It is not to be believed that any but the dullest Britons can be good subjects under that hard condition.

Apart from this foreboding, things went on much as usual in the Poyser household. Mrs Poyser thought she noticed a surprising improvement in Hetty. To be sure, the girl got 'closer tempered, and sometimes she seemed as if there'd be no drawing a word from her with cart-ropes'; but she thought much less about her dress, and went after the work quite eagerly, without any telling. And it was wonderful how she never wanted to go out now — indeed, could hardly be persuaded to go; and she bore her aunt's putting a stop to her weekly lesson in fine-work at the Chase, without the least grumbling or pouting. It must be, after all,

that she had set her heart on Adam at last, and her sudden freak of wanting to be a lady's-maid must have been caused by some little pique or misunderstanding between them, which had passed by. For whenever Adam came to the Hall Farm, Hetty seemed to be in better spirits, and to talk more than at other times, though she was almost sullen when Mr Craig or any other admirer happened to pay a visit there.

Adam himself watched her at first with trembling anxiety, which gave way to surprise and delicious hope. Five days after delivering Arthur's letter, he had ventured to go to the Hall Farm again — not without dread lest the sight of him might be painful to her. She was not in the house-place when he entered, and he sat talking to Mr and Mrs Poyser for a few minutes with a heavy fear on his heart that they might presently tell him Hetty was ill. But by-and-by there came a light step that he knew, and when Mrs Poyser said, 'Come, Hetty, where have you been?' Adam was obliged to turn round, though he was afraid to see the changed look there must be in her face. He almost started when he saw her smiling as if she were pleased to see him — looking the same as ever at a first glance, only that she had her cap on, which he had never seen her in before when he came of an evening. Still, when he looked at her again and again as she moved about or sat at her work, there was a change: the cheeks were as pink as ever, and she smiled as much as she had ever done of late, but there was something different in her eyes, in the expression of her face, in all her movements, Adam thought — something harder, older, less child-like. 'Poor thing!' he said to himself, 'that's allays likely. It's because she's had her first heartache. But she's got a spirit to bear up under it. Thank God for that.'

As the weeks went by, and he saw her always looking pleased to see him — turning up her lovely face towards him as if she meant him to understand that she was glad for him to come – and going about her work in the same equable way, making no sign of sorrow, he began to believe that her feeling towards Arthur must have been much slighter than he had imagined in his first indignation and alarm, and that she had been able to think of her girlish fancy that Arthur was in love with her and would marry her, as a folly of which she was timely cured. And it perhaps was, as he had sometimes in his more cheerful moments hoped it would be — her heart was really turning with all the more warmth towards the man she knew to have a serious love for her.

Possibly you think that Adam was not at all sagacious in his interpretations, and that it was altogether extremely unbecoming in a sensible man to behave as he did — falling in love with a girl who really had nothing more than her beauty to recommend her, attributing imaginary virtues to her, and even condescending to cleave to her after she had fallen in love with another man, waiting for her kind looks as a patient trembling dog waits for his master's eye to be turned upon him. But in so complex a thing as human nature, we must consider, it is hard to find rules without exceptions. Of course, I know that, as a rule, sensible men fall in love with the most sensible women of their acquaintance, see through all the pretty deceits of coquettish beauty, never imagine themselves loved when they are not loved, cease loving on all proper occasions, and marry the woman most fitted for them in every respect — indeed, so as to compel the approbation of all the maiden ladies in their neighbourhood. But even to this rule an exception will occur now and then in the lapse of centuries, and my friend Adam was one. For my own part, however, I respect him none the less; nay, I think the deep love he had for that sweet, rounded, blossom-like, dark-eyed Hetty, of whose inward self he was really very ignorant, came out of the very strength of his nature, and not out of any inconsistent weakness. Is it any weakness, pray, to be wrought on by exquisite music? — to feel its wondrous harmonies searching the subtlest windings of your soul, the delicate fibres of life where no memory can penetrate, and binding together your whole being past and present in one unspeakable vibration: melting you in one moment with all the tenderness, all the love that has been scattered through the toilsome years, concentrating in one emotion of heroic courage or resignation all the hard-learnt lessons of self-renouncing sympathy, blending your present joy with past sorrow, and your present sorrow with all your past joy? If not, then neither is it a weakness to be so wrought upon by the exquisite curves of a woman's cheek and neck and arms, by the liquid depths of her beseeching eyes, or the sweet childish pout of her lips. For the beauty of a lovely woman is like music: what can one say more? Beauty has an expression beyond and far above the one woman's soul that it clothes, as the words of genius have a wider meaning than the thought that prompted them: it is more than a woman's love that moves us in a woman's eyes — it seems to be a far-off mighty love that has come near to us, and made speech for itself there; the rounded neck, the dimpled arm, move us by something more than their prettiness — by their close kinship with all we have known of tenderness and peace. The noblest nature sees the most of this *impersonal* expression in beauty (it is needless to say that there are gentlemen with whiskers dyed and undyed who see none of it whatever), and for this reason, the noblest nature is often the most blinded to the character of the one woman's soul that the beauty clothes. Whence, I fear, the tragedy of human life is likely to continue for a long time to come, in spite of mental philosophers who are ready with the best receipts for avoiding all mistakes of the kind.

Our good Adam had no fine words into which he could put his feeling for Hetty: he could not disguise mystery in this way with the appearance of knowledge; he called his love frankly a mystery, as you have heard him. He only knew that the sight and memory of her moved him deeply, touching the spring of all love and tenderness, all faith and courage within him. How could he imagine narrowness, selfishness, hardness in her? He created the mind he believed in out of his own, which was large, unselfish, tender.

The hopes he felt about Hetty softened a little his feeling towards Arthur. Surely his attentions to Hetty must have been of a slight kind; they were altogether wrong, and such as no man in Arthur's position ought to have allowed himself, but they must have had an air of playfulness about them, which had probably blinded him to their danger, and had prevented them from laying any strong hold on Hetty's heart. As the new promise of happiness rose for Adam, his indignation and jealousy began to die out: Hetty was not made unhappy; he almost believed that she liked him best; and the thought sometimes crossed his mind that the friendship which had once seemed dead for ever might revive in the days to come, and he would not have to say 'good-bye' to the grand old woods, but would like them better because they were Arthur's. For this new promise of happiness, following so quickly on the shock of pain, had an intoxicating effect on the sober Adam, who had all his life been used to much hardship and moderate hope. Was he really going to have an easy lot after all? It seemed so; for at the beginning of November, Jonathan Bürge, finding it impossible to replace Adam, had at last made up his mind to offer him a share in the business, without further condition than that he should continue to give his energies to it, and renounce all thought of having a separate business of his own. Son-in-law or no son-in-law, Adam had made himself too necessary to be parted with, and his headwork was so much more important to Bürge than his skill in handicraft, that his having the management of the woods made little difference in the value of his services; and as to the bargains about the Squire's timber, it would be easy to call in a third person. Adam saw here an opening into a broadening path of prosperous work, such as he had thought of with ambitious longing ever since he was a lad: he might come to build a bridge, or a town-hall, or a factory, for he had always said to himself that Jonathan Burge's building business was like an acorn, which might be the mother of a great tree. So he gave his hand to Bürge on that bargain, and went home with his mind full of happy visions, in which (my refined reader will perhaps be shocked when I say it) the image of Hetty hovered, and smiled over plans for seasoning timber at a trifling expense, calculations as to the cheapening of bricks per thousand by water-carriage,[4] and a favourite scheme for the strengthening of roofs and walls with a peculiar form of iron girder. What then? Adam's enthusiasm lay in these things; and our love is inwrought in our enthusiasm as electricity is inwrought in the air, exalting its power by a subtle presence.

Adam would be able to take a separate house now, and provide for his mother in the old one; his prospects would justify his marrying very soon, and if Dinah consented to have Seth, their mother would perhaps be more contented to live apart from Adam. But he told himself that he would not be hasty he would not try Hetty's feeling for him until it had had time to grow strong and firm. However, to-morrow, after church, he would go to the Hall Farm, and tell them the news. Mr Poyser, he knew, would like it better than a five-pound note, and he should see if Hetty's eyes brightened at it. The months would be short with all he had to fill his mind, and this foolish eagerness which had come over him of late must not hurry him into any premature words. Yet when he got home and told his mother the good news, and ate his supper, while she sat by almost crying for joy, and wanting him to eat twice as much as usual because of his good luck, he could not help preparing her gently for the coming change, by talking of the old house being too small for them all to go on living in it always.

CHAPTER XXXIV

The Betrothal

It was a dry Sunday, and really a pleasant day for the 2nd of November. There was no sunshine, but the clouds were high, and the wind was so still that the yellow leaves which fluttered down from the hedgerow elms must have fallen from pure decay. Nevertheless, Mrs Poyser did not go to church, for she had taken a cold too serious to be neglected; only two winters ago she had been laid up for weeks with a cold; and since his wife did not go to church, Mr Poyser considered that on the whole it would be as well for him to stay away too and 'keep her company'. He could perhaps have given no precise form to the reasons that determined this conclusion; but it is well known to all experienced minds that our firmest convictions are often dependent on subtle impressions for which words are quite too coarse a medium. However it was, no one from the Poyser family went to church that afternoon except Hetty and the boys; yet Adam was bold enough to join them after church, and say that he would walk home with them, though all the way through the village he appeared to be chiefly occupied with Marty and Tommy, telling them about the squirrels in Binton Coppice, and promising to take them there some day. But when they came to the fields he said to the boys, 'Now, then, which is the stoutest walker? Him as gets to th' home-gate first shall be the first to go with me to Binton Coppice on the donkey. But Tommy must have the start up to the next stile, because he's the smallest.'

Adam had never behaved so much like a determined lover before. As soon as the boys had both set off, he looked down at Hetty, and said, 'Won't you hang on my arm, Hetty?' in a pleading tone, as if he had already asked her and she had refused. Hetty looked up at him smilingly and put her round arm through his in a moment. It was nothing to her — putting her arm through Adam's; but she knew he cared a great deal about having her arm through his, and she wished him to care. Her heart beat no faster, and she looked at the half-bare hedgerows and the ploughed field with the same sense of oppressive dulness as before. But Adam scarcely felt that he was walking; he thought Hetty must know that he was pressing her arm a little — a very little; words rushed to his lips that he dared not utter — that he had made up his mind not to utter yet; and so he was silent for the length of that field. The calm patience with which he had once waited for Hetty's love, content only with her presence and the thought of the future, had forsaken him since that terrible shock nearly three months ago. The agitations of jealousy had given a new restlessness to his passion — had made fear and uncertainty too hard almost to bear. But though he might not speak to Hetty of his love, he would tell her about his new prospects, and see if she would be pleased. So when he was enough master of himself to talk, he said –

'I'm going to tell your uncle some news that'll surprise him, Hetty; and I think he'll be glad to hear it too.'

'What's that?' Hetty said, indifferently.

'Why, Mr Bürge has offered me a share in his business, and I'm going to take it.'

There was a change in Hetty's face, certainly not produced by any agreeable impression from this news. In fact she felt a momentary annoyance and alarm; for she had so often heard it hinted by her uncle that Adam might have Mary Bürge and a share in the business any day if he liked, that she associated the two objects now, and the thought immediately occurred that perhaps Adam had given her up because of what had happened lately, and had turned towards Mary Bürge. With that thought, and before she had time to remember any reasons why it could not be true, came a new sense of forsakenness and disappointment: the one thing — the one person — her mind had rested on in its dull weariness, had slipped away from her, and peevish misery filled her eyes with tears. She was looking on the ground, but Adam saw her face, saw the tears, and before he had finished saying, 'Hetty, dear Hetty, what are you crying for?' his eager rapid thought had flown through all the causes conceivable to him, and had at last alighted on half the true one. Hetty thought he was going to marry Mary Bürge — she didn't like him to marry — perhaps she didn't like him to marry any one but herself? All caution was swept away — all reason for it was gone, and Adam could feel nothing but trembling joy. He leaned towards her and took her hand, as he said –

'I could afford to be married now, Hetty — I could make a wife comfortable; but I shall never want to be married if you won't have me.'

Hetty looked up at him, and smiled through her tears as she had done to Arthur that first evening in the

wood when she had thought he was not coming, and yet he came. It was a feebler relief, a feebler triumph she felt now, but the great dark eyes and the sweet lips were as beautiful as ever, perhaps more beautiful, for there was a more luxuriant womanliness about Hetty of late. Adam could hardly believe in the happiness of that moment. His right hand held her left, and he pressed her arm close against his heart as he leaned down towards her.

'Do you really love me, Hetty? Will you be my own wife, to love and take care of as long as I live?'

Hetty did not speak, but Adam's face was very close to hers, and she put up her round cheek against his, like a kitten. She wanted to be caressed — she wanted to feel as if Arthur were with her again.

Adam cared for no words after that, and they hardly spoke through the rest of the walk. He only said, 'I may tell your uncle and aunt, mayn't I, Hetty?' and she said, 'Yes.'

The red fire-light on the hearth at the Hall Farm shone on joyful faces that evening, when Hetty was gone up-stairs and Adam took the opportunity of telling Mr and Mrs Poyser and the grandfather that he saw his way to maintaining a wife now, and that Hetty had consented to have him.

'I hope you have no objections against me for her husband,' said Adam; 'I'm a poor man as yet, but she shall want nothing as I can work for.'

'Objections?' said Mr Poyser, while the grandfather leaned forward and brought out his long 'Nay, nay.' 'What objections can we ha' to you, lad? Never mind your being poorish as yet; there's money in your head-piece as there's money i' the sown field, but it must ha' time. You'n got enough to begin on, and we can do a deal tow'rt the bit o' furniture you'll want. Thee'st got feathers and linen to spare — plenty, eh?'

This question was of course addressed to Mrs Poyser, who was wrapped up in a warm shawl, and was too hoarse to speak with her usual facility. At first she only nodded emphatically, but she was presently unable to resist the temptation to be more explicit.

'It 'ud be a poor tale if I hadna feathers and linen,' she said, hoarsely, 'when I never sell a fowl but what's plucked,[1] and the wheel's a-going every day o' the week.'

'Come, my wench,' said Mr Poyser, when Hetty came down, 'come and kiss us, and let us wish you luck.'

Hetty went very quietly and kissed the big good-natured man.

'There!' he said, patting her on the back, 'go and kiss your aunt and your grandfather. I'm as wishful t' have you settled well as if you was my own daughter; and so's your aunt, I'll be bound, for she's done by you this seven 'ear, Hetty, as if you'd been her own. Come, come, now,' he went on, becoming jocose, as soon as Hetty had kissed her aunt and the old man, 'Adam wants a kiss too, I'll warrant, and he's a right to one now.'

Hetty turned away, smiling, towards her empty chair.

'Come, Adam, then, take one,' persisted Mr Poyser, 'else y' arena half a man.'

Adam got up, blushing like a small maiden — great strong fellow as he was — and, putting his arm round Hetty, stooped down and gently kissed her lips.

It was a pretty scene in the red fire-light: for there were no candles; why should there be, when the fire was so bright, and was reflected from all the pewter and the polished oak? No one wanted to work on a Sunday evening. Even Hetty felt something like contentment in the midst of all this love. Adam's attachment to her, Adam's caress, stirred no passion in her, were no longer enough to satisfy her vanity; but they were the best her life offered her now — they promised her some change.

There was a great deal of discussion before Adam went away, about the possibility of his finding a house that would do for him to settle in. No house was empty except the one next to Will Maskery's in the village, and that was too small for Adam now. Mr Poyser insisted that the best plan would be for Seth and his mother to move, and leave Adam in the old home, which might be enlarged after a while, for there was plenty of space in the woodyard and garden; but Adam objected to turning his mother out.

'Well, well,' said Mr Poyser at last, 'we needna fix everything to-night. We must take time to consider. You canna think o' getting married afore Easter. I'm not for long courtships, but there must be a bit o' time to make things comfortable.'

'Ay, to be sure,' said Mrs Poyser, in a hoarse whisper; 'Christian folks can't be married like cuckoos,[2] I reckon.'

'I'm a bit daunted, though,' said Mr Poyser, 'when I think as we may have notice to quit, and belike be forced to take a farm twenty mile off.'

'Eh,' said the old man, staring at the floor, and lifting his hands up and down, while his arms rested on the elbows of his chair, 'it's a poor tale if I mun leave th' ould spot, an' be buried in a strange parish. An' you'll happen ha' double rates to pay,' he added, looking up at his son.

'Well, thee mustna fret beforehand, father,' said Martin the younger. 'Happen the Captain 'ull come home and make our peace wi' th' old Squire. I build upo' that, for I know the Captain '11 see folks righted if he

can.’

CHAPTER XXXV

The Hidden Dread

It was a busy time for Adam — the time between the beginning of November and the beginning of February, and he could see little of Hetty, except on Sundays. But a happy time, nevertheless; for it was taking him nearer and nearer to March, when they were to be married; and all the little preparations for their new housekeeping marked the progress towards the longed-for day. Two new rooms had been 'run up' to the old house, for his mother and Seth were to live with them after all. Lisbeth had cried so piteously at the thought of leaving Adam, that he had gone to Hetty and asked her if, for the love of him, she would put up with his mother's ways, and consent to live with her. To his great delight, Hetty said, 'Yes; I'd as soon she lived with us as not.' Hetty's mind was oppressed at that moment with a worse difficulty than poor Lisbeth's ways, she could not care about them. So Adam was consoled for the disappointment he had felt when Seth had come back from his visit to Snowfield and said 'it was no use — Dinah's heart wasna turned towards marrying'. For when he told his mother that Hetty was willing they should all live together, and there was no more need of them to think of parting, she said, in a more contented tone than he had heard her speak in since it had been settled that he was to be married, 'Eh, my lad, I'll be as still as th' ould tabby, an' Ne'er want to do aught but the offal work,[1] as *she* wonna like t' do. An' then, we needna part the platters an' things, as ha' stood on the shelf together sin' afore thee wast born.'

There was only one cloud that now and then came across Adam's sunshine: Hetty seemed unhappy sometimes. But to all his anxious, tender questions, she replied with an assurance that she was quite contented and wished nothing different; and the next time he saw her she was more lively than usual. It might be that she was a little overdone with work and anxiety now, for soon after Christmas Mrs Poyser had taken another cold, which had brought on inflammation, and this illness had confined her to her room all through January. Hetty had to manage everything down-stairs, and half supply Molly's place too, while that good damsel waited on her mistress; and she seemed to throw herself so entirely into her new functions, working with a grave steadiness which was new in her, that Mr Poyser often told Adam she was wanting to show him what a good housekeeper he would have; but he 'doubted the lass was o'er-doing it — she must have a bit o' rest when her aunt could come down-stairs'.

This desirable event of Mrs Poyser's coming down-stairs happened in the early part of February, when some mild weather thawed the last patch of snow on the Binton Hills. On one of these days, soon after her aunt came down, Hetty went to Treddleston to buy some of the wedding things which were wanting, and which Mrs Poyser had scolded her for neglecting, observing that she supposed 'it was because they were not for th' outside, else she'd ha' bought 'em fast enough'.

It was about ten o'clock when Hetty set off, and the slight hoar-frost that had whitened the hedges in the early morning had disappeared as the sun mounted the cloudless sky. Bright February days have a stronger charm of hope about them than any other days in the year. One likes to pause in the mild rays of the sun, and look over the gates at the patient plough-horses turning at the end of the furrow, and think that the beautiful year is all before one. The birds seem to feel just the same: their notes are as clear as the clear air. There are no leaves on the trees and hedgerows, but how green all the grassy fields are! and the dark purplish brown of the ploughed earth and of the bare branches is beautiful too. What a glad world this looks like, as one drives or rides along the valleys and over the hills! I have often thought so when, in foreign countries, where the fields and woods have looked to me like our English Loamshire — the rich land tilled with just as much care, the woods rolling down the gentle slopes to the green meadows — I have come on something by the roadside which has reminded me that I am not in Loamshire: an image of a great agony — the agony of the Cross.[2] It has stood perhaps by the clustering apple-blossoms, or in the broad sunshine by the cornfield, or at a turning by the wood where a clear brook was gurgling below; and surely, if there came a traveller to this world who knew nothing of the story of man's life upon it, this image of agony would seem to him strangely out of place in the midst of this joyous nature. He would not know that hidden behind the apple-blossoms, or among the golden corn, or under the shrouding boughs of the wood, there might be a human heart beating heavily with anguish; perhaps a young blooming girl, not knowing where to turn for refuge from swift-advancing shame; understanding no more of this life of ours than a foolish lost lamb wandering farther and farther in the nightfall on the lonely heath; yet tasting the bitterest

of life's bitterness.

Such things are sometimes hidden among the sunny fields and behind the blossoming orchards; and the sound of the gurgling brook, if you came close to one spot behind a small bush, would be mingled for your ear with a despairing human sob. No wonder man's religion has much sorrow in it: no wonder he needs a suffering God.

Hetty, in her red cloak and warm bonnet, with her basket in her hand, is turning towards a gate by the side of the Treddleston road, but not that she may have a more lingering enjoyment of the sunshine, and think with hope of the long unfolding year. She hardly knows that the sun is shining; and for weeks, now, when she has hoped at all, it has been for something at which she herself trembles and shudders. She only wants to be out of the highroad, that she may walk slowly, and not care how her face looks, as she dwells on wretched thoughts; and through this gate she can get into a field-path behind the wide thick hedgerows. Her great dark eyes wander blankly over the fields like the eyes of one who is desolate, homeless, unloved, not the promised bride of a brave, tender man. But there are no tears in them: her tears were all wept away in the weary night, before she went to sleep. At the next stile the pathway branches off: there are two roads before her — one along by the hedgerow, which will by-and-by lead her into the road again; the other across the fields, which will take her much farther out of the way into the Scantlands, low shrouded pastures where she will see nobody. She chooses this, and begins to walk a little faster, as if she had suddenly thought of an object towards which it was worth while to hasten. Soon she is in the Scantlands, where the grassy land slopes gradually downwards, and she leaves the level ground to follow the slope. Farther on there is a clump of trees on the low ground, and she is making her way towards it. No, it is not a clump of trees, but a dark shrouded pool, so full with the wintry rains that the under boughs of the elder-bushes lie low beneath the water. She sits down on the grassy bank, against the stooping stem of the great oak that hangs over the dark pool. She has thought of this pool often in the nights[3] of the month that has just gone by, and now at last she is come to see it. She clasps her hands round her knees and leans forward, and looks earnestly at it, as if trying to guess what sort of bed it would make for her young round limbs.

No, she has not courage to jump into that cold watery bed, and if she had, they might find her — they might find out why she had drowned herself. There is but one thing left to her: she must go away, go where they can't find her.

After the first on-coming of her great dread, some weeks after her betrothal to Adam, she had waited and waited, in the blind vague hope that something would happen to set her free from her terror; but she could wait no longer. All the force of her nature had been concentrated on the one effort of concealment, and she had shrunk with irresistible dread from every course that could tend towards a betrayal of her miserable secret. Whenever the thought of writing to Arthur had occurred to her, she had rejected it: he could do nothing for her that would shelter her from discovery and scorn among the relatives and neighbours who once more made all her world, now her airy dream had vanished. Her imagination no longer saw happiness with Arthur, for he could do nothing that would satisfy or soothe her pride. No, something else would happen — something *must* happen — to set her free from this dread. In young, childish, ignorant souls there is constantly this blind trust in some unshapen chance: it is as hard to a boy or girl to believe that a great wretchedness will actually befall them, as to believe that they will die.

But now necessity was pressing hard upon her — now the time of her marriage was close at hand — she could no longer rest in this blind trust. She must run away; she must hide herself where no familiar eyes could detect her; and *then* the terror of wandering out into the world, of which she knew nothing, made the possibility of going to Arthur a thought which brought some comfort with it. She felt so helpless now, so unable to fashion the future for herself, that the prospect of throwing herself on him had a relief in it which was stronger than her pride. As she sat by the pool, and shuddered at the dark cold water, the hope that he would receive her tenderly — that he would care for her and think for her — was like a sense of lulling warmth, that made her for the moment indifferent to everything else; and she began now to think of nothing but the scheme by which she should get away.

She had had a letter from Dinah lately, full of kind words about the coming marriage, which she had heard of from Seth; and when Hetty had read this letter aloud to her uncle, he had said, 'I wish Dinah 'ud come again now, for she'd be a comfort to your aunt when you're gone. What do you think, my wench, o' going to see her as soon as you can be spared, and persuading her to come back wi' you? You might happen persuade her wi' telling her as her aunt wants her, for all she writes o' not being able to come.' Hetty had not liked the thought of going to Snowfield, and felt no longing to see Dinah, so she only said, 'It's so far off, uncle.' But now she thought this proposed visit would serve as a pretext for going away. She would tell her aunt when she got home again, that she should like the change of going to Snowfield for a week or ten days. And then, when she got to Stoniton, where nobody knew her, she would ask for the coach that would take her on the way to Windsor. Arthur was at Windsor, and she would go to him.

As soon as Hetty had determined on this scheme, she rose from the grassy bank of the pool, took up her basket, and went on her way to Treddleston, for she must buy the wedding things she had come out for, though she would never want them. She must be careful not to raise any suspicion that she was going to run away.

Mrs Poyser was quite agreeably surprised that Hetty wished to go and see Dinah, and try to bring her back to stay over the wedding. The sooner she went the better, since the weather was pleasant now; and Adam, when he came in the evening, said, if Hetty could set off to-morrow, he would make time to go with her to Treddleston, and see her safe into the Stoniton coach.

'I wish I could go with you and take care of you, Hetty,' he said, the next morning, leaning in at the coach door; 'but you won't stay much beyond a week — the time '11 seem long.'

He was looking at her fondly, and his strong hand held hers in its grasp. Hetty felt a sense of protection in his presence – she was used to it now: if she could have had the past undone, and known no other love than her quiet liking for Adam! The tears rose as she gave him the last look.

'God bless her for loving me,' said Adam, as he went on his way to work again, with Gyp at his heels.

But Hetty's tears were not for Adam — not for the anguish that would come upon him when he found she was gone from him for ever. They were for the misery of her own lot, which took her away from this brave tender man who offered up his whole life to her, and threw her, a poor helpless suppliant, on the man who would think it a misfortune that she was obliged to cling to him.

At three o'clock that day, when Hetty was on the coach that was to take her, they said, to Leicester — part of the long, long way to Windsor — she felt dimly that she might be travelling all this weary journey towards the beginning of new misery.

Yet Arthur was at Windsor; he would surely not be angry with her. If he did not mind about her as he used to do, he had promised to be good to her.

BOOK FIFTH

CHAPTER XXXVI

The Journey in Hope

A long, lonely journey, with sadness in the heart; away from the familiar to the strange; that is a hard and dreary thing even to the rich, the strong, the instructed: a hard thing, even when we are called by duty, not urged by dread.

What was it then to Hetty? With her poor narrow thoughts, no longer melting into vague hopes, but pressed upon by the chill of definite fear; repeating again and again the same small round of memories — shaping again and again the same childish, doubtful images of what was to come — seeing nothing in this wide world but the little history of her own pleasures and pains; with so little money in her pocket, and the way so long and difficult. Unless she could afford always to go in the coaches – and she felt sure she could not, for the journey to Stoniton was more expensive than she had expected — it was plain that she must trust to carriers' carts or slow waggons;[1] and what a time it would be before she could get to the end of her journey! The burly old coachman from Oakbourne, seeing such a pretty young woman among the outside passengers, had invited her to come and sit beside him; and feeling that it became him as a man and a coachman to open the dialogue with a joke, he applied himself as soon as they were off the stones to the elaboration of one suitable in all respects. After many cuts with his whip and glances at Hetty out of the corner of his eye, he lifted his lips above the edge of his wrapper and said –

'He's pretty nigh six foot, I'll be bound, isna he, now?'

'Who?' said Hetty, rather startled.

'Why, the sweetheart as you've left behind, or else him as you're goin' arter — which is it?'

Hetty felt her face flushing and then turning pale. She thought this coachman must know something about her. He must know Adam, and might tell him where she was gone, for it is difficult to country people to believe that those who make a figure in their own parish are not known everywhere else, and it was equally difficult to Hetty to understand that chance words could happen to apply closely to her circumstances. She was too frightened to speak.

'Hegh, hegh!' said the coachman, seeing that his joke was not so gratifying as he had expected, 'you munna take it too ser'ous; if he's behaved ill, get another. Such a pretty lass as you can get a sweetheart any day.'

Hetty's fear was allayed by-and-by, when she found that the coachman made no further allusion to her personal concerns; but it still had the effect of preventing her from asking him what were the places on the road to Windsor. She told him she was only going a little way out of Stoniton, and when she got down at the inn where the coach stopped, she hastened away with her basket to another part of the town. When she had formed her plan of going to Windsor, she had not foreseen any difficulties except that of getting away; and after she had overcome this by proposing the visit to Dinah, her thoughts flew to the meeting with Arthur, and the question how he would behave to her — not resting on any probable incidents of the journey. She was too entirely ignorant of travelling to imagine any of its details, and with all her store of money — her three guineas — in her pocket, she thought herself amply provided. It was not until she found how much it cost her to get to Stoniton that she began to be alarmed about the journey, and then, for the first time, she felt her ignorance as to the places that must be passed on her way. Oppressed with this new alarm, she walked along the grim Stoniton streets, and at last turned into a shabby little inn, where she hoped to get a cheap lodging for the night. Here she asked the landlord if he could tell her what places she must go to, to get to Windsor.

'Well, I can't rightly say. Windsor must be pretty nigh London, for it's where the king lives,'[2] was the answer. 'Anyhow, you'd best go t' Ashby next — that's south'ard. But there's as many places from here to

London as there's houses in Stoniton, by what I can make out. I've never been no traveller myself. But how comes a lone young woman like you, to be thinking o' taking such a journey as that?'

'I'm going to my brother — he's a soldier at Windsor,' said Hetty, frightened at the landlord's questioning look. 'I can't afford to go by the coach; do you think there's a cart goes toward Ashby in the morning?'

'Yes, there may be carts if anybody knowed where they started from; but you might run over the town before you found out. You'd best set off and walk, and trust to summat overtaking you.'

Every word sank like lead on Hetty's spirits; she saw the journey stretch bit by bit before her now; even to get to Ashby seemed a hard thing: it might take the day, for what she knew, and that was nothing to the rest of the journey. But it must be done — she must get to Arthur: oh, how she yearned to be again with somebody who would care for her! She who had never got up in the morning without the certainty of seeing familiar faces, people on whom she had an acknowledged claim; whose farthest journey had been to Rosseter on the pillion with her uncle; whose thoughts had always been taking holiday in dreams of pleasure, because all the business of her life was managed for her: — this kitten-like Hetty, who till a few months ago had never felt any other grief than that of envying Mary Bürge a new ribbon, or being girded at by her aunt for neglecting Totty, must now make her toilsome way in loneliness, her peaceful home left behind for ever, and nothing but a tremulous hope of distant refuge before her. Now for the first time, as she lay down to-night in the strange hard bed, she felt that her home had been a happy one, that her uncle had been very good to her, that her quiet lot at Hayslope among the things and people she knew, with her little pride in her one best gown and bonnet, and nothing to hide from any one, was what she would like to wake up to as a reality, and find that all the feverish life she had known besides was a short nightmare. She thought of all she had left behind with yearning regret for her own sake: her own misery filled her heart: there was no room in it for other people's sorrow. And yet, before the cruel letter, Arthur had been so tender and loving: the memory of that had still a charm for her, though it was no more than a soothing draught that just made pain bearable. For Hetty could conceive no other existence for herself in future than a hidden one, and a hidden life, even with love, would have had no delights for her; still less a life mingled with shame. She knew no romances, and had only a feeble share in the feelings which are the source of romance, so that well-read ladies may find it difficult to understand her state of mind. She was too ignorant of everything beyond the simple notions and habits in which she had been brought up, to have any more definite idea of her probable future than that Arthur would take care of her somehow, and shelter her from anger and scorn. He would not marry her and make her a lady; and apart from that she could think of nothing he could give towards which she looked with longing and ambition.

The next morning she rose early, and taking only some milk and bread for her breakfast, set out to walk on the road towards Ashby, under a leaden-coloured sky, with a narrowing streak of yellow, like a departing hope, on the edge of the horizon. Now in her faintness of heart at the length and difficulty of her journey, she was most of all afraid of spending her money, and becoming so destitute that she would have to ask people's charity; for Hetty had the pride not only of a proud nature but of a proud class — the class that pays the most poor-rates,[3] and most shudders at the idea of profiting by a poor-rate. It had not yet occurred to her that she might get money for her locket and earrings which she carried with her, and she applied all her small arithmetic and knowledge of prices to calculating how many meals and how many rides were contained in her two guineas, and the odd shillings, which had a melancholy look, as if they were the pale ashes of the other bright-flaming coin.

For the first few miles out of Stoniton she walked on bravely, always fixing on some tree or gate or projecting bush at the most distant visible point in the road as a goal, and feeling a faint joy when she had reached it. But when she came to the fourth milestone,[4] the first she had happened to notice among the long grass by the roadside, and read that she was still only four miles beyond Stoniton, her courage sank. She had come only this little way, and yet felt tired, and almost hungry again in the keen morning air; for though Hetty was accustomed to much movement and exertion indoors, she was not used to long walks, which produce quite a different sort of fatigue from that of household activity. As she was looking at the milestone she felt some drops falling on her face — it was beginning to rain. Here was a new trouble which had not entered into her sad thoughts before; and quite weighed down by this sudden addition to her burden, she sat down on the step of a stile and began to sob hysterically. The beginning of hardship is like the first taste of bitter food — it seems for a moment unbearable; yet, if there is nothing else to satisfy our hunger, we take another bite and find it possible to go on. When Hetty recovered from her burst of weeping, she rallied her fainting courage: it was raining, and she must try to get on to a village where she might find rest and shelter. Presently, as she walked on wearily, she heard the rumbling of heavy wheels behind her; a covered waggon was coming, creeping slowly along with a slouching driver cracking his whip beside the horses. She waited for it, thinking that if the waggoner were not a very sour-looking man, she would ask him to take her up. As the waggon approached her, the driver had fallen behind, but there was

something in the front of the big vehicle which encouraged her. At any previous moment in her life she would not have noticed it; but now, the new susceptibility that suffering had awakened in her caused this object to impress her strongly. It was only a small white-and-liver coloured spaniel which sat on the front ledge of the waggon, with large timid eyes, and an incessant trembling in the body, such as you may have seen in some of these small creatures. Hetty cared little for animals, as you know, but at this moment she felt as if the helpless timid creature had some fellowship with her, and without being quite aware of the reason, she was less doubtful about speaking to the driver, who now came forward — a large ruddy man, with a sack over his shoulders by way of scarf or mantle.

'Could you take me up in your waggon, if you're going towards Ashby?' said Hetty. 'I'll pay you for it.'

'Aw,' said the big fellow, with that slowly dawning smile which belongs to heavy faces, 'I can take y' up fawst enough wi'out bein' paid for't if you dooant mind lyin' a bit closish a-top o' the wool-packs. Where do you coom from? and what do you want at Ashby?'

'I come from Stoniton. I'm going a long way — to Windsor.'

'What! arter some service, or what?'

'Going to my brother — he's a soldier there.'

'Well, I'm going no furder nor Leicester — and fur enough too — but I'll take you, if you dooant mind being a bit long on the road. Th' hosses wooant feel *your* weight no more nor they feel the little doog there, as I puck up on the road a fortni't agoo. He war lost, I b'lieve, an's been all of a tremble iver sin'. Come, gi' us your basket, an' come behind and let me put y' in.'

To lie on the wool-packs, with a cranny left between the curtains of the awning to let in the air, was luxury to Hetty now, and she half slept away the hours till the driver came to ask her if she wanted to get down and have 'some victual'; he himself was going to eat his dinner at this 'public'. Late at night they reached Leicester, and so this second day of Hetty's j ourney was past. She had spent no money except what she had paid for her food, but she felt that this slow journeying would be intolerable for her another day, and in the morning she found her way to a coach-office to ask about the road to Windsor, and see if it would cost her too much to go part of the distance by coach again. Yes! the distance was too great — the coaches were too dear — she must give them up; but the elderly clerk at the office, touched by her pretty anxious face, wrote down for her the names of the chief places she must pass through. This was the only comfort she got in Leicester, for the men stared at her as she went along the street, and for the first time in her life Hetty wished no one would look at her. She set out walking again; but this day she was fortunate, for she was soon overtaken by a carrier's cart which carried her to Hinckley, and by the help of a return chaise, with a drunken postilion, — who frightened her by driving like Jehu the son of Nimshi,[5] and shouting hilarious remarks at her, twisting himself backwards on his saddle, — she was before night in the heart of woody Warwickshire: but still almost a hundred miles from Windsor, they told her. Oh what a large world it was, and what hard work for her to find her way in it! She went by mistake to Stratford-on-Avon, finding Stratford set down in her list of places, and then she was told she had come a long way out of the right road. It was not till the fifth day that she got to Stony Stratford.[6] That seems but a slight journey as you look at the map, or remember your own pleasant travels to and from the meadowy banks of the Avon. But how wearily long it was to Hetty! It seemed to her as if this country of flat fields and hedgerows, and dotted houses, and villages, and market-towns — all so much alike to her indifferent eyes — must have no end, and she must go on wandering among them for ever, waiting tired at toll-gates[7] for some cart to come, and then finding the cart went only a little way — a very little way — to the miller's a mile off perhaps; and she hated going into the public-houses, where she must go to get food and ask questions, because there were always men lounging there, who stared at her and joked her rudely. Her body was very weary too with these days of new fatigue and anxiety; they had made her look more pale and worn than all the time of hidden dread she had gone through at home. When at last she reached Stony Stratford, her impatience and weariness had become too strong for her economical caution; she determined to take the coach for the rest of the way, though it should cost her all her remaining money. She would need nothing at Windsor but to find Arthur. When she had paid the fare for the last coach, she had only a shilling; and as she got down at the sign of the Green Man in Windsor[8] at twelve o'clock in the middle of the seventh day, hungry and faint, the coachman came up, and begged her to 'remember him'. She put her hand in her pocket, and took out the shilling, but the tears came with the sense of exhaustion and the thought that she was giving away her last means of getting food, which she really required before she could go in search of Arthur. As she held out the shilling, she lifted up her dark tear-filled eyes to the coachman's face and said, 'Can you give me back sixpence?'

'No, no,' he said, gruffly, 'never mind — put the shilling up again.'

The landlord of the Green Man had stood near enough to witness this scene, and he was a man whose abundant feeding served to keep his good-nature, as well as his person, in high condition. And that lovely

tearful face of Hetty's would have found out the sensitive fibre in most men.

'Come, young woman, come in,' he said, 'and have a drop o' something; you're pretty well knocked up: I can see that.'

He took her into the bar and said to his wife, 'Here, missis, take this young woman into the parlour; she's a little overcome,' — for Hetty's tears were falling fast. They were merely hysterical tears: she thought she had no reason for weeping now, and was vexed that she was too weak and tired to help it. She was at Windsor at last, not far from Arthur.

She looked with eager, hungry eyes at the bread and meat and beer that the landlady brought her, and for some minutes she forgot everything else in the delicious sensations of satisfying hunger and recovering from exhaustion. The landlady sat opposite to her as she ate, and looked at her earnestly. No wonder: Hetty had thrown off her bonnet, and her curls had fallen down: her face was all the more touching in its youth and beauty because of its weary look; and the good woman's eyes presently wandered to her figure, which in her hurried dressing on her journey she had taken no pains to conceal; moreover, the stranger's eye detects what the familiar unsuspecting eye leaves unnoticed.

'Why, you're not very fit for travelling,' she said, glancing while she spoke at Hetty's ringless hand. 'Have you come far?'

'Yes,' said Hetty, roused by this question to exert more self-command, and feeling the better for the food she had taken. 'I've come a good long way, and it's very tiring. But I'm better now. Could you tell me which way to go to his place?' Here Hetty took from her pocket a bit of paper: it was the end of Arthur's letter on which he had written his address.

While she was speaking, the landlord had come in, and had begun to look at her as earnestly as his wife had done. He took up the piece of paper which Hetty handed across the table, and read the address.

'Why, what do you want at this house?' he said. It is in the nature of innkeepers, and all men who have no pressing business of their own, to ask as many questions as possible before giving any information.

'I want to see a gentleman as is there,' said Hetty.

'But there's no gentleman there,' returned the landlord. 'It's shut up — been shut up this fortnight. What gentleman is it you want? Perhaps I can let you know where to find him.'

'It's Captain Donnithorne,' said Hetty, tremulously, her heart beginning to beat painfully at this disappointment of her hope that she should find Arthur at once.

'Captain Donnithorne? Stop a bit,' said the landlord, slowly. 'Was he in the Loamshire Militia? A tall young officer with a fairish skin and reddish whiskers — and had a servant by the name o' Pym?'

'Oh yes,' said Hetty; 'you know him — where is he?'

'A fine sight o' miles away from here: the Loamshire Militia's gone to Ireland;[9] it's been gone this fortnight.'

'Look there! she's fainting,' said the landlady, hastening to support Hetty, who had lost her miserable consciousness and looked like a beautiful corpse. They carried her to the sofa and loosened her dress.

'Here's a bad business, I suspect,' said the landlord, as he brought in some water.

'Ah, it's plain enough what sort of business it is,' said the wife. 'She's not a common flaunting dratchell, I can see that. She looks like a respectable country girl, and she comes from a good way off, to judge by her tongue. She talks something like that ostler we had that come from the north: he was as honest a fellow as we ever had about the house — they're all honest folks in the north.'

'I never saw a prettier young woman in my life,' said the husband. 'She's like a pictur in a shop-winder. It goes to one's 'eart to look at her.'

'It 'ud have been a good deal better for her if she'd been uglier and had more conduct,' said the landlady, who on any charitable construction must have been supposed to have more 'conduct' than beauty. 'But she's coming to again. Fetch a drop more water.'

CHAPTER XXXVII

The Journey in Despair

Hetty was too ill through the rest of that day for any questions to be addressed to her — too ill even to think with any distinctness of the evils that were to come. She only felt that all her hope was crushed, and that instead of having found a refuge she had only reached the borders of a new wilderness where no goal lay before her. The sensations of bodily sickness, in a comfortable bed, and with the tendance of the good-natured landlady, made a sort of respite for her; such a respite as there is in the faint weariness which obliges a man to throw himself on the sand, instead of toiling onward under the scorching sun.

But when sleep and rest had brought back the strength necessary for the keenness of mental suffering, — when she lay the next morning looking at the growing light which was like a cruel taskmaster returning to urge from her a fresh round of hated hopeless labour, — she began to think what course she must take, to remember that all her money was gone, to look at the prospect of further wandering among strangers with the new clearness shed on it by the experience of her journey to Windsor. But which way could she turn? It was impossible for her to enter into any service, even if she could obtain it: there was nothing but immediate beggary before her. She thought of a young woman who had been found against the church wall at Hayslope one Sunday, nearly dead with cold and hunger — a tiny infant in her arms: the woman was rescued and taken to the parish.[1] 'The parish!' You can perhaps hardly understand the effect of that word on a mind like Hetty's, brought up among people who were somewhat hard in their feelings even towards poverty, who lived among the fields, and had little pity for want and rags as a cruel inevitable fate such as they sometimes seem in cities, but held them a mark of idleness and vice — and it was idleness and vice that brought burthens on the parish. To Hetty the 'parish' was next to the prison in obloquy; and to ask anything of strangers — to beg — lay in the same far-off hideous region of intolerable shame that Hetty had all her life thought it impossible she could ever come near. But now the remembrance of that wretched woman whom she had seen herself, on her way from church, being carried into Joshua Rann's, came back upon her with the new terrible sense that there was very little now to divide *her* from the same lot. And the dread of bodily hardship mingled with the dread of shame; for Hetty had the luxurious nature of a round, soft-coated pet animal.

How she yearned to be back in her safe home again, cherished and cared for as she had always been! Her aunt's scolding about trifles would have been music to her ears now: she longed for it: she used to hear it in a time when she had only trifles to hide. Could she be the same Hetty that used to make up the butter in the dairy with the Gueldres roses peeping in at the window — she, a runaway whom her friends would not open their doors to again, lying in this strange bed, with the knowledge that she had no money to pay for what she received, and must offer those strangers some of the clothes in her basket? It was then she thought of her locket and earrings, and seeing her pocket[2] lie near, she reached it and spread the contents on the bed before her. There were the locket and earrings in the little velvet-lined boxes, and with them there was a beautiful silver thimble which Adam had bought her, the words 'Remember me' making the ornament of the border; a steel purse, with her one shilling in it, and a small red-leather case, fastening with a strap. Those beautiful little earrings, with their delicate pearls and garnet, that she had tried in her ears with such longing in the bright sunshine on the 30th of July! She had no longing to put them in her ears now: her head with its dark rings of hair lay back languidly on the pillow, and the sadness that rested about her brow and eyes was something too hard for regretful memory. Yet she put her hands up to her ears: it was because there were some thin gold rings in them, which were also worth a little money. Yes, she could surely get some money for her ornaments: those Arthur had given her must have cost a great deal of money. The landlord and landlady had been good to her; perhaps they would help her to get the money for these things.

But this money would not keep her long: what should she do when it was gone? Where should she go? The horrible thought of want and beggary drove her once to think she would go back to her uncle and aunt, and ask them to forgive her and have pity on her. But she shrank from that idea again, as she might have shrunk from scorching metal: she could never endure that shame before her uncle and aunt, before Mary Bürge, and the servants at the Chase, and the people at Broxton, and everybody who knew her. They should never know what had happened to her. What *could* she do? She would go away from Windsor — travel again as she had done the last week, and get among the flat green fields with the high hedges round them,

where nobody could see her or know her; and there, perhaps, when there was nothing else she could do, she should get courage to drown herself in some pond like that in the Scantlands. Yes, she would get away from Windsor as soon as possible: she didn't like these people at the inn to know about her, to know that she had come to look for Captain Donnithorne: she must think of some reason to tell them why she had asked for him.

With this thought she began to put the things back into her pocket, meaning to get up and dress before the landlady came to her. She had her hand on the red-leather case, when it occurred to her that there might be something in this case which she had forgotten — something worth selling; for without knowing what she should do with her life, she craved the means of living as long as possible; and when we desire eagerly to find something, we are apt to search for it in hopeless places. No, there was nothing but common needles and pins, and dried tulip-petals between the paper leaves where she had written down her little money-accounts. But on one of these leaves there was a name, which, often as she had seen it before, now flashed on Hetty's mind like a newly-discovered message. The name was — *Dinah Morris, Snowfield.* There was a text above it, written, as well as the name, by Dinah's own hand with a little pencil, one evening that they were sitting together and Hetty happened to have the red case lying open before her. Hetty did not read the text now: she was only arrested by the name. Now, for the first time she remembered without indifference the affectionate kindness Dinah had shown her, and those words of Dinah in the bed-chamber — that Hetty must think of her as a friend in trouble. Suppose she were to go to Dinah, and ask her to help her? Dinah did not think about things as other people did: she was a mystery to Hetty, but Hetty knew she was always kind. She couldn't imagine Dinah's face turning away from her in dark reproof or scorn, Dinah's voice willingly speaking ill of her, or rejoicing in her misery, as a punishment. Dinah did not seem to belong to that world of Hetty's, whose glance she dreaded like scorching fire. But even to her Hetty shrank from beseeching and confession: she could not prevail on herself to say, 'I will go to Dinah'; she only thought of that as a possible alternative, if she had not courage for death.

The good landlady was amazed when she saw Hetty come down-stairs soon after herself, neatly dressed, and looking resolutely self-possessed. Hetty told her she was quite well this morning: she had only been very tired and overcome with her journey, for she had come a long way to ask about her brother, who had run away, and they thought he was gone for a soldier, and Captain Donnithorne might know, for he had been very kind to her brother once. It was a lame story, and the landlady looked doubtfully at Hetty as she told it; but there was a resolute air of self-reliance about her this morning, so different from the helpless prostration of yesterday, that the landlady hardly knew how to make a remark that might seem like prying into other people's affairs. She only invited her to sit down to breakfast with them, and in the course of it Hetty brought out her earrings and locket, and asked the landlord if he could help her to get money for them: her journey, she said, had cost her much more than she expected, and now she had no money to get back to her friends, which she wanted to do at once.

It was not the first time the landlady had seen the ornaments, for she had examined the contents of Hetty's pocket yesterday, and she and her husband had discussed the fact of a country girl having these beautiful things, with a stronger conviction than ever that Hetty had been miserably deluded by the fine young officer.

'Well,' said the landlord, when Hetty had spread the precious trifles before him, 'we might take 'em to the jeweller's shop, for there's one not far off; but Lord bless you, they wouldn't give you a quarter o' what the things are worth. And you wouldn't like to part with 'em?' he added, looking at her inquiringly.

'Oh, I don't mind,' said Hetty, hastily, 'so as I can get money to go back.'

'And they might think the things were stolen, as you wanted to sell 'em,' he went on; 'for it isn't usual for a young woman like you to have fine jewellery like that.'

The blood rushed to Hetty's face with anger. 'I belong to respectable folks,' she said; 'I'm not a thief.'

'No, that you aren't, I'll be bound,' said the landlady; 'and you'd no call to say that', looking indignantly at her husband. 'The things were gev to her: that's plain enough to be seen.'

'I didn't mean as I thought so,' said the husband, apologetically, 'but I said it was what the jeweller might think, and so he wouldn't be offering much money for 'em.'

'Well,' said the wife, 'suppose you were to advance some money on the things yourself, and then if she liked to redeem 'em when she got home, she could. But if we heard nothing from her after two months, we might do as we liked with 'em.'

I will not say that in this accommodating proposition the landlady had no regard whatever to the possible reward of her good-nature in the ultimate possession of the locket and earrings: indeed, the effect they would have in that case on the mind of the grocer's wife had presented itself with remarkable vividness to her rapid imagination. The landlord took up the ornaments and pushed out his lips in a meditative manner.

He wished Hetty well, doubtless; but pray, how many of your well-wishers would decline to make a little gain out of you? Your landlady is sincerely affected at parting with you, respects you highly, and will really rejoice if any one else is generous to you; but at the same time she hands you a bill by which she gains as high a percentage as possible.

'How much money do you want to get home with, young woman?' said the well-wisher, at length.

'Three guineas,' answered Hetty, fixing on the sum she set out with, for want of any other standard, and afraid of asking too much.

'Well, I've no objections to advance you three guineas,' said the landlord; 'and if you like to send it me back and get the jewellery again, you can, you know: the Green Man isn't going to run away.'

'Oh yes, I'll be very glad if you'll give me that,' said Hetty, relieved at the thought that she would not have to go to the jeweller's, and be stared at and questioned.

'But if you want the things again, you'll write before long,' said the landlady, 'because when two months are up, we shall make up our minds as you don't want 'em.'

'Yes,' said Hetty, indifferently.

The husband and wife were equally content with this arrangement. The husband thought, if the ornaments were not redeemed, he could make a good thing of it by taking them to London and selling them: the wife thought she would coax the good man into letting her keep them. And they were accommodating Hetty, poor thing: — a pretty, respectable-looking young woman, apparently in a sad case. They declined to take anything for her food and bed: she was quite welcome. And at eleven o'clock Hetty said 'Good-bye' to them, with the same quiet, resolute air she had worn all the morning, mounting the coach that was to take her twenty miles back along the way she had come.

There is a strength of self-possession which is the sign that the last hope has departed. Despair no more leans on others than perfect contentment, and in despair pride ceases to be counteracted by the sense of dependence.

Hetty felt that no one could deliver her from the evils that would make life hateful to her; and no one, she said to herself, should ever know her misery and humiliation. No; she would not confess even to Dinah: she would wander out of sight, and drown herself where her body would never be found, and no one should know what had become of her.

When she got off this coach, she began to walk again, and take cheap rides in carts, and get cheap meals, going on and on without distinct purpose, yet strangely, by some fascination, taking the way she had come, though she was determined not to go back to her own country. Perhaps it was because she had fixed her mind on the grassy Warwickshire fields, with the bushy tree-studded hedgerows that made a hiding-place even in this leafless season. She went more slowly than she came, often getting over the stiles, and sitting for hours under the hedgerows, looking before her with blank, beautiful eyes; fancying herself at the edge of a hidden pool, low down, like that in the Scantlands; wondering if it were very painful to be drowned, and if there would be anything worse after death than what she dreaded in life. Religious doctrines had taken no hold on Hetty's mind: she was one of those numerous people who have had godfathers and godmothers, learned their catechism, been confirmed, and gone to church every Sunday,[3] and yet, for any practical result of strength in life, or trust in death, have never appropriated a single Christian idea or Christian feeling. You would misunderstand her thoughts during these wretched days, if you imagined that they were influenced either by religious fears or religious hopes.

She chose to go to Stratford-on-Avon again, where she had gone before by mistake; for she remembered some grassy fields on her former way towards it — fields among which she thought she might find just the sort of pool she had in her mind. Yet she took care of her money still; she carried her basket: death seemed still a long way off, and life was so strong in her! She craved food and rest — she hastened towards them at the very moment she was picturing to herself the bank from which she would leap towards death. It was already five days since she had left Windsor, for she had wandered about, always avoiding speech or questioning looks, and recovering her air of proud self-dependence whenever she was under observation, choosing her decent lodging at night, and dressing herself neatly in the morning, and setting off on her way steadily, or remaining under shelter if it rained, as if she had a happy life to cherish.

And yet, even in her most self-conscious moments, the face was sadly different from that which had smiled at itself in the old specked glass, or smiled at others when they glanced at it admiringly. A hard and even fierce look had come in the eyes, though their lashes were as long as ever, and they had all their dark brightness. And the cheek was never dimpled with smiles now. It was the same rounded, pouting, childish prettiness, but with all love and belief in love departed from it — the sadder for its beauty, like that wondrous Medusa-face,[4] with the passionate, passionless lips.

At last she was among the fields she had been dreaming of, on a long narrow pathway leading towards a

wood. If there should be a pool in that wood! It would be better hidden than one in the fields. No, it was not a wood, only a wild brake, where there had once been gravel-pits, leaving mounds and hollows studded with brushwood and small trees. She roamed up and down, thinking there was perhaps a pool in every hollow before she came to it, till her limbs were weary, and she sat down to rest. The afternoon was far advanced, and the leaden sky was darkening, as if the sun were setting behind it. After a little while Hetty started up again, feeling that darkness would soon come on; and she must put off finding the pool till tomorrow, and make her way to some shelter for the night. She had quite lost her way in the fields, and might as well go in one direction as another, for aught she knew. She walked through field after field, and no village, no house was in sight; but *there,* at the corner of this pasture, there was a break in the hedges; the land seemed to dip down a little, and two trees leaned towards each other across the opening. Hetty's heart gave a great beat as she thought there must be a pool there. She walked towards it heavily over the tufted grass, with pale lips and a sense of trembling: it was as if the thing were come in spite of herself, instead of being the object of her search.

There it was, black under the darkening sky: no motion, no sound near. She set down her basket, and then sank down herself on the grass, trembling. The pool had its wintry depth now:[5] by the time it got shallow, as she remembered the pools did at Hayslope, in the summer, no one could find out that it was her body. But then there was her basket — she must hide that too: she must throw it into the water — make it heavy with stones first, and then throw it in. She got up to look about for stones, and soon brought five or six, which she laid down beside her basket, and then sat down again. There was no need to hurry — there was all the night to drown herself in. She sat leaning her elbow on the basket. She was weary, hungry. There were some buns in her basket — three, which she had supplied herself with at the place where she ate her dinner. She took them out now, and ate them eagerly, and then sat still again, looking at the pool. The soothed sensation that came over her from the satisfaction of her hunger, and this fixed dreamy attitude, brought on drowsiness, and presently her head sank down on her knees. She was fast asleep.

When she awoke it was deep night, and she felt chill. She was frightened at this darkness — frightened at the long night before her. If she *could* but throw herself into the water! No, not yet. She began to walk about that she might get warm again, as if she would have more resolution then. Oh how long the time was in that darkness! The bright hearth and the warmth and the voices of home, — the secure uprising and lying down, — the familiar fields, the familiar people, the Sundays and holidays with their simple joys of dress and feasting, — all the sweets of her young life rushed before her now, and she seemed to be stretching her arms towards them across a great gulf. She set her teeth when she thought of Arthur: she cursed him, without knowing what her cursing would do: she wished he too might know desolation, and cold, and a life of shame that he dared not end by death.

The horror of this cold, and darkness, and solitude — out of all human reach — became greater every long minute: it was almost as if she were dead already, and knew that she was dead, and longed to get back to life again. But no: she was alive still; she had not taken the dreadful leap. She felt a strange contradictory wretchedness and exultation: wretchedness, that she did not dare to face death; exultation, that she was still in life — that she might yet know light and warmth again. She walked backwards and forwards to warm herself, beginning to discern something of the objects around her, as her eyes became accustomed to the night: the darker line of the hedge, the rapid motion of some living creature — perhaps a field-mouse – rushing across the grass. She no longer felt as if the darkness hedged her in: she thought she could walk back across the field, and get over the stile; and then, in the very next field, she thought she remembered there was a hovel of furze[6] near a sheepfold. If she could get into that hovel, she would be warmer; she could pass the night there, for that was what Alick did at Hayslope in lambing-time. The thought of this hovel brought the energy of a new hope: she took up her basket and walked across the field, but it was some time before she got in the right direction for the stile. The exercise and the occupation of finding the stile were a stimulus to her, however, and lightened the horror of the darkness and solitude. There were sheep in the next field, and she startled a group as she set down her basket and got over the stile; and the sound of their movement comforted her, for it assured her that her impression was right: this *was* the field where she had seen the hovel, for it was the field where the sheep were. Right on along the path, and she would get to it. She reached the opposite gate, and felt her way along its rails, and the rails of the sheepfold, till her hand encountered the pricking of the gorsy wall. Delicious sensation! She had found the shelter: she groped her way, touching the prickly gorse, to the door, and pushed it open. It was an ill-smelling close place, but warm, and there was straw on the ground: Hetty sank down on the straw with a sense of escape. Tears came — she had never shed tears before since she left Windsor — tears and sobs of hysterical joy that she had still hold of life, that she was still on the familiar earth, with the sheep near her. The very consciousness of her own limbs was a delight to her: she turned up her sleeves, and kissed her arms with the passionate love of life. Soon warmth and weariness lulled her in the midst of her sobs, and

she fell continually into dozing, fancying herself at the brink of the pool again — fancying that she had jumped into the water, and then awaking with a start, and wondering where she was. But at last deep dreamless sleep came; her head, guarded by her bonnet, found a pillow against the gorsy wall; and the poor soul, driven to and fro between two equal terrors, found the one relief that was possible to it – the relief of unconsciousness.

Alas! that relief seems to end the moment it has begun. It seemed to Hetty as if those dozing dreams had only passed into another dream — that she was in the hovel, and her aunt was standing over her with a candle in her hand. She trembled under her aunt's glance, and opened her eyes. There was no candle, but there was light in the hovel — the light of early morning through the open door. And there was a face looking down on her; but it was an unknown face, belonging to an elderly man in a smock-frock.

'Why, what do you do here, young woman?' the man said, roughly.

Hetty trembled still worse under this real fear and shame than she had done in her momentary dream under her aunt's glance. She felt that she was like a beggar already — found sleeping in that place. But in spite of her trembling, she was so eager to account to the man for her presence here, that she found words at once.

'I lost my way,' she said. 'I'm travelling — north'ard, and I got away from the road into the fields, and was overtaken by the dark. Will you tell me the way to the nearest village?'

She got up as she was speaking, and put her hands to her bonnet to adjust it, and then laid hold of her basket.

The man looked at her with a slow bovine gaze, without giving her any answer, for some seconds. Then he turned away and walked towards the door of the hovel, but it was not till he got there that he stood still, and, turning his shoulder half round towards her, said –

'Aw, I can show you the way to Norton, if you like. But what do you do gettin' out o' the highroad?' he added, with a tone of gruff reproof. 'Y'ull be gettin' into mischief, if you dooant mind.'

'Yes,' said Hetty, 'I won't do it again. I'll keep in the road, if you'll be so good as show me how to get to it.'

'Why dooant you keep where there's finger-poasses an' folks to ax the way on?' the man said, still more gruffly. 'Anybody 'ud think you was a wild woman, an' look at yer.'

Hetty was frightened at this gruff old man, and still more at this last suggestion that she looked like a wild woman. As she followed him out of the hovel she thought she would give him a sixpence for telling her the way, and then he would not suppose she was wild. As he stopped to point out the road to her, she put her hand in her pocket to get the sixpence ready, and when he was turning away, without saying good-morning, she held it out to him and said, 'Thank you; will you please to take something for your trouble?'

He looked slowly at the sixpence, and then said, 'I want none o' your money. You'd better take care on't, else you'll get it stool from yer, if you go trapesin' about the fields like a mad woman a-that-way.'

The man left her without further speech, and Hetty held on her way. Another day had risen, and she must wander on. It was no use to think of drowning herself — she could not do it, at least while she had money left to buy food, and strength to journey on. But the incident on her waking this morning heightened her dread of that time when her money would be all gone; she would have to sell her basket and clothes then, and she would really look like a beggar or a wild woman, as the man had said. The passionate joy in life she had felt in the night, after escaping from the brink of the black cold death in the pool, was gone now. Life now, by the morning light, with the impression of that man's hard wondering look at her, was as full of dread as death; — it was worse; it was a dread to which she felt chained, from which she shrank and shrank as she did from the black pool, and yet could find no refuge from it.

She took out her money from her purse, and looked at it; she had still two-and-twenty shillings; it would serve her for many days more, or it would help her to get on faster to Stonyshire, within reach of Dinah. The thought of Dinah urged itself more strongly now, since the experience of the night had driven her shuddering imagination away from the pool. If it had been only going to Dinah — if nobody besides Dinah would ever know — Hetty could have made up her mind to go to her. The soft voice, the pitying eyes, would have drawn her. But afterwards the other people must know, and she could no more rush on that shame than she could rush on death.

She must wander on and on, and wait for a lower depth of despair to give her courage. Perhaps death would come to her, for she was getting less and less able to bear the day's weariness. And yet — such is the strange action of our souls, drawing us by a lurking desire towards the very ends we dread — Hetty, when she set out again from Norton, asked the straightest road northward towards Stonyshire, and kept it all that day.

Poor wandering Hetty, with the rounded childish face, and the hard unloving despairing soul looking out

of it — with the narrow heart and narrow thoughts, no room in them for any sorrows but her own, and tasting that sorrow with the more intense bitterness! My heart bleeds for her as I see her toiling along on her weary feet, or seated in a cart, with her eyes fixed vacantly on the road before her, never thinking or caring whither it tends, till hunger comes and makes her desire that a village may be near.

What will be the end? — the end of her objectless wandering, apart from all love, caring for human beings only through her pride, clinging to life only as the hunted wounded brute clings to it?

God preserve you and me from being the beginners of such misery!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

The Quest

The first ten days after Hetty's departure passed as quietly as any other days with the family at the Hall Farm, and with Adam at his daily work. They had expected Hetty to stay away a week or ten days at least, perhaps a little longer if Dinah came back with her, because there might then be something to detain them at Snowfield. But when a fortnight had passed they began to feel a little surprise that Hetty did not return; she must surely have found it pleasanter to be with Dinah than any one could have supposed. Adam, for his part, was getting very impatient to see her, and he resolved that, if she did not appear the next day (Saturday), he would set out on Sunday morning to fetch her. There was no coach on a Sunday; but by setting out before it was light, and perhaps getting a lift in a cart by the way, he would arrive pretty early at Snowfield, and bring back Hetty the next day — Dinah too, if she were coming. It was quite time Hetty came home, and he would afford to lose his Monday for the sake of bringing her.

His project was quite approved at the Farm when he went there on Saturday evening. Mrs Poyser desired him emphatically not to come back without Hetty, for she had been quite too long away, considering the things she had to get ready by the middle of March, and a week was surely enough for any one to go out for their health. As for Dinah, Mrs Poyser had small hope of their bringing her, unless they could make her believe the folks at Hayslope were twice as miserable as the folks at Snowfield. 'Though,' said Mrs Poyser, by way of conclusion, 'you might tell her she's got but one aunt left, and *she's* wasted pretty nigh to a shadder;[1] and we shall p'rhaps all be gone twenty mile further off her next Michaelmas, and shall die o' broken hearts among strange folks, and leave the children fatherless and motherless.'

'Nay, nay,' said Mr Poyser, who certainly had the air of a man perfectly heart-whole, 'it isna so bad as that. Thee't looking rarely now, and getting flesh every day. But I'd be glad for Dinah t' come, for she'd help thee wi' the little uns: they took t' her wonderful.'

So at daybreak, on Sunday, Adam set off. Seth went with him the first mile or two, for the thought of Snowfield, and the possibility that Dinah might come again, made him restless, and the walk with Adam in the cold morning air, both in their best clothes, helped to give him a sense of Sunday calm. It was the last morning in February, with a low grey sky, and a slight hoar-frost on the green border of the road and on the black hedges. They heard the gurgling of the full brooklet hurrying down the hill, and the faint twittering of the early birds. For they walked in silence, though with a pleased sense of companionship.

'Good-bye, lad,' said Adam, laying his hand on Seth's shoulder, and looking at him affectionately as they were about to part, 'I wish thee wast going all the way wi' me, and as happy as I am.'

'I'm content, Addy, I'm content,' said Seth, cheerfully. 'I'll be an old bachelor, belike, and make a fuss wi' thy children.'

They turned away from each other, and Seth walked leisurely homeward, mentally repeating one of his favourite hymns — he was very fond of hymns: –

> 'Dark and cheerless is the morn
> Unaccompanied by thee:
> Joyless is the day's return
> Till thy mercy's beams I see:
> Till thou inward light impart,
> Glad my eyes and warm my heart.
> Visit, then, this soul of mine,
> Pierce the gloom of sin and grief, –
> Fill me, Radiancy Divine,
> Scatter all my unbelief.
> More and more thyself display,
> Shining to the perfect day.'[2]

Adam walked much faster, and any one coming along the Oakbourne road at sunrise that morning must have had a pleasant sight in this tall broad-chested man, striding along with a carriage as upright and firm as any soldier's, glancing with keen glad eyes at the dark-blue hills as they began to show themselves on his

way. Seldom in Adam's life had his face been so free from any cloud of anxiety as it was this morning; and this freedom from care, as is usual with constructive practical minds like his, made him all the more observant of the objects round him, and all the more ready to gather suggestions from them towards his own favourite plans and ingenious contrivances. His happy love — the knowledge that his steps were carrying him nearer and nearer to Hetty, who was so soon to be his — was to his thoughts what the sweet morning air was to his sensations: it gave him a consciousness of wellbeing that made activity delightful. Every now and then there was a rush of more intense feeling towards her, which chased away other images than Hetty; and along with that would come a wondering thankfulness that all this happiness was given to him — that this life of ours had such sweetness in it. For Adam had a devout mind, though he was perhaps rather impatient of devout words; and his tenderness lay very close to his reverence, so that the one could hardly be stirred without the other. But after feeling had welled up and poured itself out in this way, busy thought would come back with the greater vigour; and this morning it was intent on schemes by which the roads might be improved that were so imperfect all through the country, and on picturing all the benefits that might come from the exertions of a single country gentleman, if he would set himself to getting the roads made good in his own district.[3]

It seemed a very short walk, the ten miles to Oakbourne, that pretty town within sight of the blue hills, where he breakfasted. After this, the country grew barer and barer: no more rolling woods, no more wide-branching trees near frequent homesteads, no more bushy hedgerows; but grey stone walls intersecting the meagre pastures, and dismal wide-scattered grey stone houses on broken lands where mines had been and were no longer. 'A hungry land,' said Adam to himself. 'I'd rather go south'ard, where they say it's as flat as a table, than come to live here; though if Dinah likes to live in a country where she can be the most comfort to folks, she's i' the right to live o' this side; for she must look as if she'd come straight from heaven, like th' angels in the desert, to strengthen them as ha' got nothing t' eat.'[4] And when at last he came in sight of Snowfield, he thought it looked like a town that was 'fellow to the country', though the stream through the valley where the great mill stood gave a pleasant greenness to the lower fields. The town lay, grim, stony, and unsheltered, up the side of a steep hill, and Adam did not go forward to it at present, for Seth had told him where to find Dinah. It was at a thatched cottage outside the town, a little way from the mill — an old cottage, standing sideways towards the road, with a little bit of potato-ground[5] before it. Here Dinah lodged with an elderly couple; and if she and Hetty happened to be out, Adam could learn where they were gone, or when they would be at home again. Dinah might be out on some preaching errand, and perhaps she would have left Hetty at home. Adam could not help hoping this, and as he recognized the cottage by the roadside before him, there shone out in his face that involuntary smile which belongs to the expectation of a near joy.

He hurried his step along the narrow causeway, and rapped at the door. It was opened by a very clean old woman, with a slow palsied shake of the head.[6]

'Is Dinah Morris at home?' said Adam.

'Eh?… no,' said the old woman, looking up at this tall stranger with a wonder that made her slower of speech than usual. 'Will you please to come in?' she added, retiring from the door, as if recollecting herself. 'Why, ye're brother to the young man as come afore, arena ye?'

'Yes,' said Adam, entering. 'That was Seth Bede. I'm his brother Adam. He told me to give his respects to you and your good master.'

'Ay, the same t' him: he was a gracious young man. An' ye feature him,[7] On'y ye're darker. Sit ye down i' th' arm-chair. My man isna come home from meeting.'[8]

Adam sat down patiently, not liking to hurry the shaking old woman with questions, but looking eagerly towards the narrow twisting stairs in one corner, for he thought it was possible Hetty might have heard his voice, and would come down them.

'So you're come to see Dinah Morris?' said the old woman, standing opposite to him. 'An' you didna know she was away from home, then?'

'No,' said Adam, 'but I thought it likely she might be away, seeing as it's Sunday. But the other young woman — is she at home, or gone along with Dinah?'

The old woman looked at Adam with a bewildered air.

'Gone along wi' her?' she said. 'Eh, Dinah's gone to Leeds, a big town ye may ha' heared on, where there's a many o' the Lord's people. She's been gone sin' Friday was a fortnight: they sent her the money for her journey. You may see her room here,' she went on, opening a door, and not noticing the effect of her words on Adam. He rose and followed her, and darted an eager glance into the little room, with its narrow bed, the portrait of Wesley on the wall, and the few books lying on the large Bible. He had had an irrational hope that Hetty might be there. He could not speak in the first moment after seeing that the room was

empty; an undefined fear had seized him – something had happened to Hetty on the journey. Still the old woman was so slow of speech and apprehension, that Hetty might be at Snowfield after all.

'It's a pity ye didna know,' she said. 'Have ye come from your own country o' purpose to see her?'

'But Hetty – Hetty Sorrel,' said Adam, abruptly; 'where is *she?'*

'I know nobody by that name,' said the old woman, wonder – ingly. 'Is it anybody ye've heared on at Snowfield?'

'Did there come no young woman here — very young and pretty — Friday was a fortnight, to see Dinah Morris?'

'Nay; I'n seen no young woman.'

'Think; are you quite sure? A girl, eighteen years old, with dark eyes and dark curly hair, and a red cloak on, and a basket on her arm? You couldn't forget her if you saw her.'

'Nay; Friday was a fortnight — it was the day as Dinah went away — there come nobody. There's Ne'er been nobody asking for her till you come, for the folks about know as she's gone. Eh dear, eh dear, is there summat the matter?'

The old woman had seen the ghastly look of fear in Adam's face. But he was not stunned or confounded: he was thinking eagerly where he could inquire about Hetty.

'Yes; a young woman started from our country to see Dinah, Friday was a fortnight. I came to fetch her back. I'm afraid something has happened to her. I can't stop. Good-bye.'

He hastened out of the cottage, and the old woman followed him to the gate, watching him sadly with her shaking head, as he almost ran towards the town. He was going to inquire at the place where the Oakbourne coach stopped.

No! no young woman like Hetty had been seen there. Had any accident happened to the coach a fortnight ago? No. And there was no coach to take him back to Oakbourne that day. Well, he would walk: he couldn't stay here, in wretched inaction. But the innkeeper, seeing that Adam was in great anxiety, and entering into this new incident with the eagerness of a man who passes a great deal of time with his hands in his pockets looking into an obstinately monotonous street, offered to take him back to Oakbourne in his own 'taxed cart'[9] this very evening. It was not five o'clock; there was plenty of time for Adam to take a meal, and yet to get to Oakbourne before ten o'clock. The innkeeper declared that he really wanted to go to Oakbourne, and might as well go to-night; he should have all Monday before him then. Adam, after making an ineffectual attempt to eat, put the food in his pocket, and, drinking a draught of ale, declared himself ready to set off. As they approached the cottage, it occurred to him that he would do well to learn from the old woman where Dinah was to be found in Leeds: if there was trouble at the Hall Farm — he only half admitted the foreboding that there would be — the Poysers might like to send for Dinah. But Dinah had not left any address, and the old woman, whose memory for names was infirm, could not recall the name of the 'blessed woman' who was Dinah's chief friend in the Society[10] at Leeds.

During that long, long journey in the taxed cart, there was time for all the conjectures of importunate fear and struggling hope. In the very first shock of discovering that Hetty had not been to Snowfield, the thought of Arthur had darted through Adam like a sharp pang: but he tried for some time to ward off its return by busying himself with modes of accounting for the alarming fact, quite apart from that intolerable thought. Some accident had happened. Hetty had, by some strange chance, got into a wrong vehicle from Oakbourne: she had been taken ill, and did not want to frighten them by letting them know. But this frail fence of vague improbabilities was soon hurled down by a rush of distinct agonizing fears. Hetty had been deceiving herself in thinking that she could love and marry him: she had been loving Arthur all the while: and now, in her desperation at the nearness of their marriage, she had run away. And she was gone to *him.* The old indignation and jealousy rose again, and prompted the suspicion that Arthur had been dealing falsely — had written to Hetty — had tempted her to come to him – being unwilling, after all, that she should belong to another man besides himself. Perhaps the whole thing had been contrived by him, and he had given her directions how to follow him to Ireland: for Adam knew that Arthur had been gone thither three weeks ago, having recently learnt it at the Chase. Every sad look of Hetty's, since she had been engaged to Adam, returned upon him now with all the exaggeration of painful retrospect. He had been foolishly sanguine and confident. The poor thing hadn't perhaps known her own mind for a long while; had thought that she could forget Arthur; had been momentarily drawn towards the man who offered her a protecting, faithful love. He couldn't bear to blame her: she never meant to cause him this dreadful pain. The blame lay with that man who had selfishly played with her heart — had perhaps even deliberately lured her away.

At Oakbourne, the ostler at the Royal Oak remembered such a young woman as Adam described getting out of the Treddleston coach more than a fortnight ago — wasn't likely to forget such a pretty lass as that in

a hurry — was sure she had not gone on by the Buxton coach that went through Snowfield, but had lost sight of her while he went away with the horses, and had never set eyes on her again. Adam then went straight to the house from which the Stoniton coach started: Stoniton was the most obvious place for Hetty to go to first, whatever might be her destination, for she would hardly venture on any but the chief coach-roads. She had been noticed here too, and was remembered to have sat on the box by the coachman; but the coachman could not be seen, for another man had been driving on that road in his stead the last three or four days: he could probably be seen at Stoniton, through inquiry at the inn where the coach put up. So the anxious, heart-stricken Adam must of necessity wait and try to rest till morning — nay, till eleven o'clock, when the coach started.

At Stoniton another delay occurred, for the old coachman who had driven Hetty would not be in the town again till night. When he did come he remembered Hetty well, and remembered his own joke addressed to her, quoting it many times to Adam, and observing with equal frequency that he thought there was something more than common, because Hetty had not laughed when he joked her. But he declared, as the people had done at the inn, that he had lost sight of Hetty directly she got down. Part of the next morning was consumed in inquiries at every house in the town from which a coach started — (all in vain; for you know Hetty did not start from Stoniton by coach, but on foot in the grey morning) — and then in walking out to the first toll-gates on the different lines of road, in the forlorn hope of finding some recollection of her there. No, she was not to be traced any farther; and the next hard task for Adam was to go home, and carry the wretched tidings to the Hall Farm. As to what he should do beyond that, he had come to two distinct resolutions amidst the tumult of thought and feeling which was going on within him while he went to and fro. He would not mention what he knew of Arthur Donnithorne's behaviour to Hetty till there was a clear necessity for it: it was still possible Hetty might come back, and the disclosure might be an injury or an offence to her. And as soon as he had been home, and done what was necessary there to prepare for his further absence, he would start off to Ireland: if he found no trace of Hetty on the road, he would go straight to Arthur Donnithorne, and make himself certain how far he was acquainted with her movements. Several times the thought occurred to him that he would consult Mr Irwine; but that would be useless unless he told him all, and so betrayed the secret about Arthur. It seems strange that Adam, in the incessant occupation of his mind about Hetty, should never have alighted on the probability that she had gone to Windsor, ignorant that Arthur was no longer there. Perhaps the reason was, that he could not conceive Hetty's throwing herself on Arthur uncalled; he imagined no cause that could have driven her to such a step, after that letter written in August. There were but two alternatives in his mind: either Arthur had written to her again and enticed her away, or she had simply fled from her approaching marriage with himself, because she found, after all, she could not love him well enough, and yet was afraid of her friends' anger if she retracted.

With this last determination on his mind, of going straight to Arthur, the thought that he had spent two days in inquiries which had proved to be almost useless, was torturing to Adam; and yet, since he would not tell the Poysers his conviction as to where Hetty was gone, or his intention to follow her thither, he must be able to say to them that he had traced her as far as possible.

It was after twelve o'clock on Tuesday night when Adam reached Treddleston; and, unwilling to disturb his mother and Seth, and also to encounter their questions at that hour, he threw himself without undressing on a bed at the 'Waggon Overthrown', and slept hard from pure weariness. Not more than four hours, however; for before five o'clock he set out on his way home in the faint morning twilight. He always kept a key of the workshop door in his pocket, so that he could let himself in; and he wished to enter without awaking his mother, for he was anxious to avoid telling her the new trouble himself by seeing Seth first, and asking him to tell her when it should be necessary. He walked gently along the yard, and turned the key gently in the door; but, as he expected, Gyp, who lay in the workshop, gave a sharp bark. It subsided when he saw Adam, holding up his finger at him to impose silence; and in his dumb, tailless joy he must content himself with rubbing his body against his master's legs.

Adam was too heart-sick to take notice of Gyp's fondling. He threw himself on the bench, and stared dully at the wood and the signs of work around him, wondering if he should ever come to feel pleasure in them again; while Gyp, dimly aware that there was something wrong with his master, laid his rough grey head on Adam's knee, and wrinkled his brows to look up at him. Hitherto, since Sunday afternoon, Adam had been constantly among strange people and in strange places, having no associations with the details of his daily life; and now that by the light of this new morning he was come back to his home, and surrounded by the familiar objects that seemed for ever robbed of their charm, the reality — the hard, inevitable reality — of his troubles pressed upon him with a new weight. Right before him was an unfinished chest of drawers, which he had been making in spare moments for Hetty's use, when his home should be hers.

Seth had not heard Adam's entrance, but he had been roused by Gyp's bark, and Adam heard him moving

about in the room above, dressing himself. Seth's first thoughts were about his brother: he would come home to-day, surely, for the business would be wanting him sadly by to-morrow, but it was pleasant to think he had had a longer holiday than he had expected. And would Dinah come too? Seth felt that that was the greatest happiness he could look forward to for himself, though he had no hope left that she would ever love him well enough to marry him; but he had often said to himself, it was better to be Dinah's friend and brother than any other woman's husband. If he could but be always near her, instead of living so far off!

He came down-stairs and opened the inner door leading from the kitchen into the workshop, intending to let out Gyp; but he stood still in the doorway, smitten with a sudden shock at the sight of Adam seated listlessly on the bench, pale, unwashed, with sunken blank eyes, almost like a drunkard in the morning. But Seth felt in an instant what the marks meant: not drunkenness, but some great calamity. Adam looked up at him without speaking, and Seth moved forward towards the bench, himself trembling so that speech did not come readily.

'God have mercy on us, Addy,' he said, in a low voice, sitting down on the bench beside Adam, 'what is it?'

Adam was unable to speak: the strong man, accustomed to suppress the signs of sorrow, had felt his heart swell like a child's at this first approach of sympathy. He fell on Seth's neck and sobbed.

Seth was prepared for the worst now, for, even in his recollections of their boyhood, Adam had never sobbed before.

'Is it death, Adam? Is she dead?' he asked, in a low tone, when Adam raised his head and was recovering himself.

'No, lad; but she's gone — gone away from us. She's never been to Snowfield. Dinah's been gone to Leeds ever since last Friday was a fortnight, the very day Hetty set out. I can't find out where she went after she got to Stoniton.'

Seth was silent from utter astonishment: he knew nothing that could suggest to him a reason for Hetty's going away.

'Hast any notion what she's done it for?' he said, at last.

'She can't ha' loved me: she didn't like our marriage when it came nigh — that must be it,' said Adam. He had determined to mention no further reason.

'I hear mother stirring,' said Seth. 'Must we tell her?'

'No, not yet,' said Adam, rising from the bench, and pushing the hair from his face, as if he wanted to rouse himself. 'I can't have her told yet; and I must set out on another journey directly, after I've been to the village and th' Hall Farm. I can't tell thee where I'm going, and thee must say to her I'm gone on business as nobody is to know anything about. I'll go and wash myself now.' Adam moved towards the door of the workshop, but after a step or two he turned round, and, meeting Seth's eyes with a calm sad glance, he said, 'I must take all the money out o' the tin box, lad; but if anything happens to me, all the rest'll be thine, to take care o' mother with.'

Seth was pale and trembling: he felt there was some terrible secret under all this. 'Brother,' he said, faintly — he never called Adam 'brother' except in solemn moments — 'I don't believe you'll do anything as you can't ask God's blessing on.'

'Nay, lad,' said Adam, 'don't be afraid. I'm for doing nought but what's a man's duty.'

The thought that if he betrayed his trouble to his mother, she would only distress him by words, half of blundering affection, half of irrepressible triumph that Hetty proved as unfit to be his wife as she had always foreseen, brought back some of his habitual firmness and self-command. He had felt ill on his journey home — he told her when she came down, — had stayed all night at Treddleston for that reason; and a bad headache, that still hung about him this morning, accounted for his paleness and heavy eyes.

He determined to go to the village, in the first place; attend to his business for an hour, and give notice to Bürge of his being obliged to go on a journey, which he must beg him not to mention to any one; for he wished to avoid going to the Hall Farm near breakfast-time, when the children and servants would be in the house-place, and there must be exclamations in their hearing about his having returned without Hetty. He waited until the clock struck nine before he left the work-yard at the village, and set off, through the fields towards the Farm. It was an immense relief to him, as he came near the Home Close, to see Mr Poyser advancing towards him, for this would spare him the pain of going to the house. Mr Poyser was walking briskly this March morning, with a sense of Spring business on his mind: he was going to cast the master's eye on the shoeing of a new cart-horse, carrying his spud[11] as a useful companion by the way. His surprise was great when he caught sight of Adam, but he was not a man given to presentiments of evil.

'Why, Adam, lad, is't you? Have ye been all this time away, and not brought the lasses back, after all?

Where are they?'

'No, I've not brought 'em,' said Adam, turning round, to indicate that he wished to walk back with Mr Poyser.

'Why,' said Martin, looking with sharper attention at Adam, 'ye look bad. Is there anything happened?'

'Yes,' said Adam, heavily. 'A sad thing's happened. I didna find Hetty at Snowfield.'

Mr Poyser's good-natured face showed signs of troubled astonishment. 'Not find her? What's happened to her?' he said, his thoughts flying at once to bodily accident.

'That I can't tell, whether anything's happened to her. She never went to Snowfield — she took the coach to Stoniton, but I can't learn nothing of her after she got down from the Stoniton coach.'

'Why, you donna mean she's run away?' said Martin, standing still, so puzzled and bewildered that the fact did not yet make itself felt as a trouble by him.

'She must ha' done,' said Adam. 'She didn't like our marriage when it came to the point — that must be it. She'd mistook her feelings.'

Martin was silent for a minute or two, looking on the ground, and rooting up the grass with his spud, without knowing what he was doing. His usual slowness was always trebled when the subject of speech was painful. At last he looked up, right in Adam's face, saying –

'Then she didna deserve t' ha' ye, my lad. An' I feel i' fault myself, for she was my niece, and I was allays hot for her marr'ing ye. There's no amends I can make ye, lad — the more's the pity: it's a sad cut-up for ye, I doubt.'

Adam could say nothing; and Mr Poyser, after pursuing his walk for a little while, went on: –

'I'll be bound she's gone after trying to get a lady's-maid's place, for she'd got that in her head half a year ago, and wanted me to gi' my consent. But I'd thought better on her,' he added, shaking his head slowly and sadly — 'I'd thought better on her, nor to look for this, after she'd gi'en y' her word, an' everything been got ready.'

Adam had the strongest motives for encouraging this supposition in Mr Poyser, and he even tried to believe that it might possibly be true. He had no warrant for the *certainty* that she was gone to Arthur.

'It was better it should be so,' he said, as quietly as he could, 'if she felt she couldn't like me for a husband. Better run away before than repent after. I hope you won't look harshly on her if she comes back, as she may do if she finds it hard to get on away from home.'

'I canna look on her as I've done before,' said Martin, decisively. 'She's acted bad by you, and by all of us. But I'll not turn my back on her: she's but a young un, and it's the first harm I've knowed on her. It'll be a hard job for me to tell her aunt. Why didna Dinah come back wi' ye? — she'd ha' helped to pacify her aunt a bit.'

'Dinah wasn't at Snowfield. She's been gone to Leeds this fortnight; and I couldn't learn from th' old woman any direction where she is at Leeds, else I should ha' brought it you.'

'She'd a deal better be staying wi' her own kin,' said Mr Poyser, indignantly, 'than going preaching among strange folks a-that'n.'

'I must leave you now, Mr Poyser,' said Adam, 'for I've a deal to see to.'

'Ay, you'd best be after your business, and I must tell the missis when I go home. It's a hard job.'

'But,' said Adam, 'I beg particular, you'll keep what's happened quiet for a week or two. I've not told my mother yet, and there's no knowing how things may turn out.'

'Ay, ay; least said, soonest mended. We'n no need to say why the match is broke off, an' we may hear of her after a bit. Shake hands wi' me, lad: I wish I could make thee amends.'

There was something in Martin Poyser's throat at that moment which caused him to bring out those scanty words in rather a broken fashion. Yet Adam knew what they meant all the better; and the two honest men grasped each other's hard hands in mutual understanding.

There was nothing now to hinder Adam from setting off. He had told Seth to go to the Chase, and leave a message for the Squire, saying that Adam Bede had been obliged to start off suddenly on a journey, — and to say as much, and no more, to any one else who made inquiries about him. If the Poysers learned that he was gone away again, Adam knew they would infer that he was gone in search of Hetty.

He had intended to go right on his way from the Hall Farm; but now the impulse which had frequently visited him before – to go to Mr Irwine, and make a confidant of him — recurred with the new force which belongs to a last opportunity. He was about to start on a long journey — a difficult one — by sea — and no soul would know where he was gone. If anything happened to him? or, if he absolutely needed help in any matter concerning Hetty? Mr Irwine was to be trusted; and the feeling which made Adam shrink from telling anything which was *her* secret, must give way before the need there was that she should have some

one else besides himself, who would be prepared to defend her in the worst extremity. Towards Arthur, even though he might have incurred no new guilt, Adam felt that he was not bound to keep silence when Hetty's interest called on him to speak.

'I must do it,' said Adam, when these thoughts, which had spread themselves through hours of his sad journeying, now rushed upon him in an instant, like a wave that had been slowly gathering 'it's the right thing. I can't stand alone in this way any longer.'

CHAPTER XXXIX

The Tidings

Adam turned his face towards Broxton and walked with his swiftest stride, looking at his watch with the fear that Mr Irwine might be gone out — hunting, perhaps. The fear and haste together produced a state of strong excitement before he reached the Rectory gate; and outside it he saw the deep marks of a recent hoof on the gravel.

But the hoofs were turned towards the gate, not away from it; and though there was a horse against the stable door, it was not Mr Irwine's: it had evidently had a journey this morning, and must belong to some one who had come on business. Mr Irwine was at home, then; but Adam could hardly find breath and calmness to tell Carroll that he wanted to speak to the Rector. The double suffering of certain and uncertain sorrow had begun to shake the strong man. The butler looked at him wonderingly, as he threw himself on a bench in the passage and stared absently at the clock on the opposite wall: the master had somebody with him, he said, but he heard the study door open — the stranger seemed to be coming out, and as Adam was in a hurry, he would let the master know at once.

Adam sat looking at the clock: the minute-hand was hurrying along the last five minutes to ten, with a loud hard indifferent tick, and Adam watched the movement and listened to the sound as if he had had some reason for doing so. In our times of bitter suffering, there are almost always these pauses, when our consciousness is benumbed to everything but some trivial perception or sensation. It is as if semi-idiocy came to give us rest from the memory and the dread which refuse to leave us in our sleep.

Carroll, coming back, recalled Adam to the sense of his burthen. He was to go into the study immediately. 'I can't think what that strange person's come about,' the butler added, from mere incontinence of remark, as he preceded Adam to the door, 'he's gone i' the dining-room. And master looks unaccountable — as if he was frightened.' Adam took no notice of the words: he could not care about other people's business. But when he entered the study and looked in Mr Irwine's face, he felt in an instant that there was a new expression in it, strangely different from the warm friendliness it had always worn for him before. A letter lay open on the table, and Mr Irwine's hand was on it; but the changed glance he cast on Adam could not be owing entirely to preoccupation with some disagreeable business, for he was looking eagerly towards the door, as if Adam's entrance were a matter of poignant anxiety to him.

'You want to speak to me, Adam,' he said, in that low constrainedly quiet tone which a man uses when he is determined to suppress agitation. 'Sit down here.' He pointed to a chair just opposite to him, at no more than a yard's distance from his own, and Adam sat down with a sense that this cold manner of Mr Irwine's gave an additional unexpected difficulty to his disclosure. But when Adam had made up his mind to a measure, he was not the man to renounce it for any but imperative reasons.

'I come to you, sir,' he said, 'as the gentleman I look up to most of anybody. I've something very painful to tell you – something as it'll pain you to hear, as well as me to tell. But if I speak o' the wrong other people have done, you'll see I didn't speak till I'd good reason.'

Mr Irwine nodded slowly, and Adam went on rather tremulously.

'You was t' ha' married me and Hetty Sorrel, you know, sir, o' the fifteenth o' this month. I thought she loved me, and I was th' happiest man i' the parish. But a dreadful blow's come upon me.'

Mr Irwine started up from his chair, as if involuntarily, but then, determined to control himself, walked to the window and looked out.

'She's gone away, sir, and we don't know where. She said she was going to Snowfield o' Friday was a fortnight, and I went last Sunday to fetch her back; but she'd never been there, and she took the coach to Stoniton, and beyond that I can't trace her. But now I'm going a long journey to look for her, and I can't trust t' anybody but you where I'm going.'

Mr Irwine came back from the window and sat down.

'Have you no idea of the reason why she went away?' he said.

'It's plain enough she didn't want to marry me, sir,' said Adam. 'She didn't like it when it came so near. But that isn't all, I doubt. There's something else I must tell you, sir. There's somebody else concerned besides me.'

A gleam of something — it was almost like relief or joy[1] – came across the eager anxiety of Mr Irwine's face at that moment. Adam was looking on the ground, and paused a little: the next words were hard to speak. But when he went on, he lifted up his head and looked straight at Mr Irwine. He would do the thing he had resolved to do, without flinching.

'You know who's the man I've reckoned my greatest friend,' he said, 'and used to be proud to think as I should pass my life i' working for him, and had felt so ever since we were lads'…

Mr Irwine, as if all self-control had forsaken him, grasped Adam's arm, which lay on the table, and, clutching it tightly like a man in pain, said, with pale lips and a low hurried voice –

'No, Adam, no — don't say it, for God's sake!'

Adam, surprised at the violence of Mr Irwine's feeling, repented of the words that had passed his lips, and sat in distressed silence. The grasp on his arm gradually relaxed, and Mr Irwine threw himself back in his chair, saying, 'Go on – I must know it.'

'That man played with Hetty's feelings, and behaved to her as he'd no right to do to a girl in her station o' life — made her presents, and used to go and meet her out a-walking: I found it out only two days before he went away — found him a-kissing her as they were parting in the Grove. There'd been nothing said between me and Hetty then, though I'd loved her for a long while, and she knew it. But I reproached him with his wrong actions, and words and blows passed between us; and he said solemnly to me, after that, as it had been all nonsense, and no more than a bit o' flirting. But I made him write a letter to tell Hetty he'd meant nothing; for I saw clear enough, sir, by several things as I hadn't understood at the time, as he'd got hold of her heart, and I thought she'd belike go on thinking of him, and never come to love another man as wanted to marry her. And I gave her the letter, and she seemed to bear it all after a while better than I'd expected… and she behaved kinder and kinder to me… I daresay she didn't know her own feelings then, poor thing, and they came back upon her when it was too late… I don't want to blame her… I can't think as she meant to deceive me. But I was encouraged to think she loved me, and — you know the rest, sir. But it's on my mind as he's been false to me, and 'ticed her away, and she's gone to him — and I'm going now to see; for I can never go to work again till I know what's become of her.'

During Adam's narrative, Mr Irwine had had time to recover his self-mastery in spite of the painful thoughts that crowded upon him. It was a bitter remembrance to him now — that morning when Arthur breakfasted with him, and seemed as if he were on the verge of a confession. It was plain enough *now* what he had wanted to confess. And if their words had taken another turn… if he himself had been less fastidious about intruding on another man's secrets… it was cruel to think how thin a film had shut out rescue from all this guilt and misery. He saw the whole history now by that terrible illumination which the present sheds back upon the past. But every other feeling as it rushed upon him was thrown into abeyance by pity, deep respectful pity, for the man who sat before him, — already so bruised, going forth with sad blind resignedness to an unreal sorrow, while a real one was close upon him, too far beyond the range of common trial for him ever to have feared it. His own agitation was quelled by a certain awe that comes over us in the presence of a great anguish; for the anguish he must inflict on Adam was already present to him. Again he put his hand on the arm that lay on the table, but very gently this time, as he said solemnly –

'Adam, my dear friend, you have had some hard trials in your life. You can bear sorrow manfully, as well as act manfully: God requires both tasks at our hands. And there is a heavier sorrow coming upon you than any you have yet known. But you are not guilty — you have not the worst of all sorrows. God help him who has!'

The two pale faces looked at each other; in Adam's there was trembling suspense, in Mr Irwine's hesitating, shrinking pity. But he went on.

'I have had news of Hetty this morning. She is not gone to *him.* She is in Stonyshire — at Stoniton.'

Adam started up from his chair, as if he thought he could have leaped to her that moment. But Mr Irwine laid hold of his arm again, and said, persuasively, 'Wait, Adam, wait.' So he sat down.

'She is in a very unhappy position — one which will make it worse for you to find her, my poor friend, than to have lost her for ever.'

Adam's lips moved tremulously, but no sound came. They moved again, and he whispered, 'Tell me.'

'She has been arrested… she is in prison.'

It was as if an insulting blow had brought back the spirit of resistance into Adam. The blood rushed to his face, and he said, loudly and sharply –

'For what?'

'For a great crime — the murder of her child.'

'It *can't be!*' Adam almost shouted, starting up from his chair, and making a stride towards the door; but he turned round again, setting his back against the book-case, and looking fiercely at Mr Irwine. 'It isn't

possible. She never had a child. She can't be guilty. *Who* says it?'

'God grant she may be innocent, Adam. We can still hope she is.'

'But who says she is guilty?' said Adam, violently. 'Tell me everything.'

'Here is a letter from the magistrate before whom she was taken, and the constable who arrested her is in the dining-room. She will not confess her name or where she comes from; but I fear, I fear, there can be no doubt it is Hetty. The description of her person corresponds, only that she is said to look very pale and ill. She had a small red-leather pocket-book in her pocket with two names written in it — one at the beginning, "Hetty Sorrel, Hayslope", and the other near the end, "Dinah Morris, Snowfield". She will not say which is her own name — she denies everything, and will answer no questions; and application has been made to me, as a magistrate, that I may take measures for identifying her, for it was thought probable that the name which stands first is her own name.'

'But what proof have they got against her, if it *is* Hetty?' said Adam, still violently, with an effort that seemed to shake his whole frame. 'I'll not believe it. It couldn't ha' been, and none of us know it.'

'Terrible proof that she was under the temptation to commit the crime; but we have room to hope that she did not really commit it. Try and read that letter, Adam.'

Adam took the letter between his shaking hands, and tried to fix his eyes steadily on it. Mr Irwine meanwhile went out to give some orders. When he came back, Adam's eyes were still on the first page — he couldn't read — he could not put the words together, and make out what they meant. He threw it down at last, and clenched his fist.

'It's *his* doing,' he said; 'if there's been any crime, it's at his door, not at hers. *He* taught her to deceive — *he* deceived me first. Let 'em put *him* on his trial — let him stand in court beside her, and I'll tell 'em how he got hold of her heart, and 'ticed her t' evil, and then lied to me. Is *he* to go free, while they lay all the punishment on her… so weak and young?'

The image called up by these last words gave a new direction to poor Adam's maddened feelings. He was silent, looking at the corner of the room as if he saw something there. Then he burst out again, in a tone of appealing anguish –

'I *can't* bear it… O God, it's too hard to lay upon me — it's too hard to think she's wicked.'

Mr Irwine had sat down again in silence: he was too wise to utter soothing words at present, and indeed the sight of Adam before him, with that look of sudden age which sometimes comes over a young face in moments of terrible emotion — the hard bloodless look of the skin, the deep lines about the quivering mouth, the furrows in the brow — the sight of this strong firm man shattered by the invisible stroke of sorrow, moved him so deeply that speech was not easy. Adam stood motionless, with his eyes vacantly fixed in this way for a minute or two; in that short space he was living through all his love again.

'She can't ha' done it,' he said, still without moving his eyes, as if he were only talking to himself: 'it was fear made her hide it… I forgive her for deceiving me… I forgive thee, Hetty… thee wast deceived too… it's gone hard wi' thee, my poor Hetty… but they'll never make me believe it.'

He was silent again for a few moments, and then he said, with fierce abruptness –

'I'll go to him — I'll bring him back — I'll make him go and look at her in her misery — he shall look at her till he can't forget it — it shall follow him night and day — as long as he lives it shall follow him — he shan't escape wi' lies this time — I'll fetch him, I'll drag him myself.'

In the act of going towards the door, Adam paused automatically and looked about for his hat, quite unconscious where he was, or who was present with him. Mr Irwine had followed him, and now took him by the arm, saying, in a quiet but decided tone –

'No, Adam, no; I'm sure you will wish to stay and see what good can be done for *her,* instead of going on a useless errand of vengeance. The punishment will surely fall without your aid. Besides, he is no longer in Ireland: he must be on his way home — or would be, long before you arrived; for his grandfather, I know, wrote for him to come at least ten days ago. I want you now to go with me to Stoniton. I have ordered a horse for you to ride with us, as soon as you can compose yourself.'

While Mr Irwine was speaking, Adam recovered his consciousness of the actual scene: he rubbed his hair off his forehead and listened.

'Remember,' Mr Irwine went on, 'there are others to think of, and act for, besides yourself, Adam: there are Hetty's friends, the good Poysers, on whom this stroke will fall more heavily than I can bear to think. I expect it from your strength of mind, Adam — from your sense of duty to God and man — that you will try to act as long as action can be of any use.'

In reality, Mr Irwine proposed this journey to Stoniton for Adam's own sake. Movement, with some object before him, was the best means of counteracting the violence of suffering in these first hours.

'You *will* go with me to Stoniton, Adam?' he said again, after a moment's pause. 'We have to see if it is

really Hetty who is there, you know.'

'Yes, sir,' said Adam, 'I'll do what you think right. But the folks at th' Hall Farm?'

'I wish them not to know till I return to tell them myself. I shall have ascertained things then which I am uncertain about now, and I shall return as soon as possible. Come now, the horses are ready.'

CHAPTER XL

The Bitter Waters[1] Spread

Mr Irwine returned from Stoniton in a post-chaise that night, and the first words Carroll said to him, as he entered the house, were, that Squire Donnithorne was dead — found dead in his bed at ten o'clock that morning — and that Mrs Irwine desired him to say she should be awake when Mr Irwine came home, and she begged him not to go to bed without seeing her.

'Well, Dauphin,' Mrs Irwine said, as her son entered her room, 'you're come at last. So the old gentleman's fidgetiness and low spirits, which made him send for Arthur in that sudden way, really meant something. I suppose Carroll has told you that Donnithorne was found dead in his bed this morning. You will believe my prognostications another time, though I daresay I shan't live to prognosticate anything but my own death.'

'What have they done about Arthur?' said Mr Irwine. 'Sent a messenger to await him at Liverpool?'

'Yes, Ralph was gone before the news was brought to us. Dear Arthur, I shall live now to see him master at the Chase, and making good times on the estate, like a generous-hearted fellow as he is. He'll be as happy as a king now.'

Mr Irwine could not help giving a slight groan: he was worn with anxiety and exertion, and his mother's light words were almost intolerable.

'What are you so dismal about, Dauphin? Is there any bad news? Or are you thinking of the danger for Arthur in crossing that frightful Irish Channel at this time of year?'

'No, mother, I'm not thinking of that; but I'm not prepared to rejoice just now.'

'You've been worried by this law business that you've been to Stoniton about. What in the world is it, that you can't tell me?'

'You will know by-and-by, mother. It would not be right for me to tell you at present. Good-night: you'll sleep now you have no longer anything to listen for.'

Mr Irwine gave up his intention of sending a letter to meet Arthur, since it would not now hasten his return: the news of his grandfather's death would bring him as soon as he could possibly come. He could go to bed now and get some needful rest, before the time came for the morning's heavy duty of carrying his sickening news to the Hall Farm and to Adam's home.

Adam himself was not come back from Stoniton, for though he shrank from seeing Hetty, he could not bear to go to a distance from her again.

'It's no use, sir,' he said to the Rector — 'it's no use for me to go back. I can't go to work again while she's here; and I couldn't bear the sight o' the things and folks round home. I'll take a bit of a room here, where I can see the prison walls, and perhaps I shall get, in time, to bear seeing *her*.'

Adam had not been shaken in his belief that Hetty was innocent of the crime she was charged with, for Mr Irwine, feeling that the belief in her guilt would be a crushing addition to Adam's load, had kept from him the facts which left no hope in his own mind. There was not any reason for thrusting the whole burthen on Adam at once, and Mr Irwine, at parting, only said, 'If the evidence should tell too strongly against her, Adam, we may still hope for a pardon. Her youth and other circumstances will be a plea for her.'

'Ah, and it's right people should know how she was tempted into the wrong way,' said Adam, with bitter earnestness. 'It's right they should know it was a fine gentleman made love to her, and turned her head wi' notions. You'll remember, sir, you've promised to tell my mother, and Seth, and the people at the Farm, who it was as led her wrong, else they'll think harder of her than she deserves. You'll be doing her a hurt by sparing him, and I hold him the guiltiest before God, let her ha' done what she may. If you spare him, I'll expose him!'

'I think your demand is just, Adam,' said Mr Irwine, 'but when you are calmer, you will judge Arthur more mercifully. I say nothing now, only that his punishment is in other hands than ours.'

Mr Irwine felt it hard upon him that he should have to tell of Arthur's sad part in the story of sin and sorrow — he who cared for Arthur with fatherly affection — who had cared for him with fatherly pride. But he saw clearly that the secret must be known before long, even apart from Adam's determination, since it

was scarcely to be supposed that Hetty would persist to the end in her obstinate silence.[2] He made up his mind to withhold nothing from the Poysers, but to tell them the worst at once, for there was no time to rob the tidings of their suddenness. Hetty's trial must come on at the Lent assizes,[3] and they were to be held at Stoniton the next week. It was scarcely to be hoped that Martin Poyser could escape the pain of being called as a witness, and it was better he should know everything as long beforehand as possible.

Before ten o'clock on Thursday morning the home at the Hall Farm was a house of mourning for a misfortune felt to be worse than death. The sense of family dishonour was too keen even in the kind-hearted Martin Poyser the younger, to leave room for any compassion towards Hetty. He and his father were simple-minded farmers, proud of their untarnished character, proud that they came of a family which had held up its head and paid its way as far back as its name was in the parish register; and Hetty had brought disgrace on them all – disgrace that could never be wiped out. That was the all-conquering feeling in the mind both of father and son — the scorching sense of disgrace, which neutralized all other sensibility; and Mr Irwine was struck with surprise to observe that Mrs Poyser was less severe than her husband. We are often startled by the severity of mild people on exceptional occasions; the reason is, that mild people are most liable to be under the yoke of traditional impressions.

'I'm willing to pay any money as is wanted towards trying to bring her off,' said Martin the younger when Mr Irwine was gone, while the old grandfather was crying in the opposite chair, 'but I'll not go nigh her, nor ever see her again, by my own will. She's made our bread bitter to us, for all our lives to come, an' we shall Ne'er hold up our heads i' this parish nor i' any other. The parson talks o' folks pitying us; it's poor amends pity 'ull make us.'

'Pity?' said the grandfather, sharply. 'I Ne'er wanted folks's pity i' *my* life afore… an' I mun begin to be looked down on now, an' me turned seventy-two last St Thomas's,[4] an' all th' under-bearers and pall-bearers as I'n picked for my funeral are i' this parish and the next to't…. It's o' no use now… I mun be ta'en to the grave by strangers.'

'Don't fret so, father,' said Mrs Poyser, who had spoken very little, being almost overawed by her husband's unusual hardness and decision. 'You'll have your children wi' you; an' there's the lads and the little un 'ull grow up in a new parish as well as i' th' old un.'

'Ah, there's no staying i' this country for us now,' said Mr Poyser, and the hard tears trickled slowly down his round cheeks. 'We thought it 'ud be bad luck if the old Squire gave us notice this Lady Day, but I must gi' notice myself now, an' see if there can anybody be got to come an' take to the crops as I'n put i' the ground; for I wonna stay upo' that man's land a day longer nor I'm forced to't. An' me as thought him such a good upright young man, as I should be glad when he come to be our landlord. I'll Ne'er lift my hat to him again, nor sit i' the same church wi' him… a man as has brought shame on respectable folks… an' pretended to be such a friend t' everybody…. Poor Adam there… a fine friend he's been t' Adam, making speeches an' talking so fine, an' all the while poisoning the lad's life, as it's much if he can stay i' this country any more nor we can.'

'An' you t' ha' to go into court, and own you're akin t' her,' said the old man. 'Why, they'll cast it up to the little un, as isn't four 'ear old, some day — they'll cast it up t' her as she'd a cousin tried at the 'sizes for murder.'

'It'll be their own wickedness, then,' said Mrs Poyser, with a sob in her voice. 'But there's One above 'ull take care o' the innicent child, else it's but little truth they tell us at church. It'll be harder nor ever to die an' leave the little uns, an' nobody to be a mother to 'em.'

'We'd better ha' sent for Dinah, if we'd known where she is,' said Mr Poyser; 'but Adam said she'd left no direction where she'd be at Leeds.'

'Why, she'd be wi' that woman as was a friend t' her aunt Judith,' said Mrs Poyser, comforted a little by this suggestion of her husband's. 'I've often heard Dinah talk of her, but I can't remember what name she called her by. But there's Seth Bede; he's like enough to know, for she's a preaching woman as the Methodists think a deal on.'

'I'll send to Seth,' said Mr Poyser. 'I'll send Alick to tell him to come, or else to send us word o' the woman's name, an' thee canst write a letter ready to send off to Treddles'on as soon as we can make out a direction.'

'It's poor work writing letters when you want folks to come to you i' trouble,' said Mrs Poyser. 'Happen it'll be ever so long on the road, an' never reach her at last.'

Before Alick arrived with the message, Lisbeth's thoughts too had already flown to Dinah, and she had said to Seth –

'Eh, there's no comfort for us i' this world any more, wi'out thee couldst get Dinah Morris to come to us, as she did when my old man died. I'd like her to come in an' take me by th' hand again, an' talk to me:

she'd tell me the rights on't, belike – she'd happen know some good i' all this trouble an' heart-break comin' upo' that poor lad, as Ne'er done a bit o' wrong in's life, but war better nor anybody else's son, pick the country round. Eh, my lad… Adam, my poor lad!'

'Thee wouldstna like me to leave thee, to go and fetch Dinah?' said Seth, as his mother sobbed, and rocked herself to and fro.

'Fetch her?' said Lisbeth, looking up, and pausing from her grief, like a crying child, who hears some promise of consolation. 'Why, what place is't she's at, do they say?'

'It's a good way off, mother — Leeds, a big town. But I could be back in three days, if thee couldst spare me.'

'Nay, nay, I canna spare thee. Thee must go an' see thy brother, an' bring me word what he's a-doin'. Mester Irwine said he'd come an' tell me, but I canna make out so well what it means when he tells me. Thee must go thysen, sin' Adam wonna let me go to him. Write a letter to Dinah, canstna? Thee't fond enough o' writin' when nobody wants thee.'

'I'm not sure where she'd be i' that big town,' said Seth. 'If I'd gone myself, I could ha' found out by asking the members o' the Society. But perhaps, if I put Sarah Williamson, Methodist preacher, Leeds,[5] o' th' outside, it might get to her; for most like she'd be wi' Sarah Williamson.'

Alick came now with the message, and Seth, finding that Mrs Poyser was writing to Dinah, gave up the intention of writing himself; but he went to the Hall Farm to tell them all he could suggest about the address of the letter, and warn them that there might be some delay in the delivery, from his not knowing an exact direction.

On leaving Lisbeth, Mr Irwine had gone to Jonathan Bürge, who had also a claim to be acquainted with what was likely to keep Adam away from business for some time; and before six o'clock that evening there were few people in Broxton and Hayslope who had not heard the sad news. Mr Irwine had not mentioned Arthur's name to Bürge, and yet the story of his conduct towards Hetty, with all the dark shadows cast upon it by its terrible consequences, was presently as well known as that his grandfather was dead, and that he was come into the estate. For Martin Poyser felt no motive to keep silence towards the one or two neighbours who ventured to come and shake him sorrowfully by the hand on the first day of his trouble; and Carroll, who kept his ears open to all that passed at the Rectory, had framed an inferential version of the story, and found early opportunities of communicating it.

One of those neighbours who came to Martin Poyser and shook him by the hand without speaking for some minutes, was Bartle Massey. He had shut up his school, and was on his way to the Rectory, where he arrived about half-past seven in the evening, and, sending his duty to Mr Irwine, begged pardon for troubling him at that hour, but had something particular on his mind. He was shown into the study, where Mr Irwine soon joined him.

'Well, Bartle?' said Mr Irwine, putting out his hand. That was not his usual way of saluting the schoolmaster, but trouble makes us treat all who feel with us very much alike. 'Sit down.'

'You know what I'm come about as well as I do, sir, I daresay,' said Bartle.

'You wish to know the truth about the sad news that has reached you… about Hetty Sorrel?'

'Nay, sir, what I wish to know is about Adam Bede. I understand you left him at Stoniton, and I beg the favour of you to tell me what's the state of the poor lad's mind, and what he means to do. For as for that bit o' pink-and-white they've taken the trouble to put in jail, I don't value her a rotten nut — not a rotten nut — only for the harm or good that may come out of her to an honest man — a lad I've set such store by — trusted to, that he'd make my bit o' knowledge go a good way in the world…. Why, sir, he's the only scholar I've had in this stupid country that ever had the will or the head-piece for mathematics. If he hadn't had so much hard work to do, poor fellow, he might have gone into the higher branches, and then this might never have happened — might never have happened.'

Bartle was heated by the exertion of walking fast in an agitated frame of mind, and was not able to check himself on this first occasion of venting his feelings. But he paused now to rub his moist forehead, and probably his moist eyes also.

'You'll excuse me, sir,' he said, when this pause had given him time to reflect, 'for running on in this way about my own feelings, like that foolish dog of mine, howling in a storm, when there's nobody wants to listen to me. I came to hear you speak, not to talk myself; if you'll take the trouble to tell me what the poor lad's doing.'

'Don't put yourself under any restraint, Bartle,' said Mr Irwine. 'The fact is, I'm very much in the same condition as you just now; I've a great deal that's painful on my mind, and I find it hard work to be quite silent about my own feelings and only attend to others. I share your concern for Adam, though he is not the only one whose sufferings I care for in this affair. He intends to remain at Stoniton till after the trial: it will

come on probably a week to-morrow. He has taken a room there, and I encouraged him to do so, because I think it better he should be away from his own home at present; and, poor fellow, he still believes Hetty is innocent — he wants to summon up courage to see her if he can; he is unwilling to leave the spot where she is.'

'Do you think the creatur's guilty, then?' said Bartle. 'Do you think they'll hang her?'

'I'm afraid it will go hard with her: the evidence is very strong. And one bad symptom is that she denies everything – denies that she has had a child, in the face of the most positive evidence. I saw her myself, and she was obstinately silent to me; she shrank up like a frightened animal when she saw me. I was never so shocked in my life as at the change in her. But I trust that, in the worst case, we may obtain a pardon for the sake of the innocent who are involved.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' said Bartle, forgetting in his irritation to whom he was speaking — 'I beg your pardon, sir, I mean it's stuff and nonsense for the innocent to care about her being hanged. For my own part, I think the sooner such women are put out o' the world the better; and the men that help 'em to do mischief had better go along with 'em for that matter. What good will you do by keeping such vermin alive? eating the victual that 'ud feed rational beings. But if Adam's fool enough to care about it, I don't want him to suffer more than's needful.… Is he very much cut up, poor fellow?' Bartle added, taking out his spectacles and putting them on, as if they would assist his imagination.

'Yes, I'm afraid the grief cuts very deep,' said Mr Irwine. 'He looks terribly shattered, and a certain violence came over him now and then yesterday, which made me wish I could have remained near him. But I shall go to Stoniton again to-morrow, and I have confidence enough in the strength of Adam's principle to trust that he will be able to endure the worst without being driven to anything rash.'

Mr Irwine, who was involuntarily uttering his own thoughts rather than addressing Bartle Massey in the last sentence, had in his mind the possibility that the spirit of vengeance towards Arthur, which was the form Adam's anguish was continually taking, might make him seek an encounter that was likely to end more fatally than the one in the Grove. This possibility heightened the anxiety with which he looked forward to Arthur's arrival. But Bartle thought Mr Irwine was referring to suicide, and his face wore a new alarm.

'I'll tell you what I have in my head, sir,' he said, 'and I hope you'll approve of it. I'm going to shut up my school: if the scholars come, they must go back again, that's all: and I shall go to Stoniton and look after Adam till this business is over. I'll pretend I'm come to look on at the assizes; he can't object to that. What do you think about it, sir?'

'Well,' said Mr Irwine, rather hesitatingly, 'there would be some real advantages in that… and I honour you for your friendship towards him, Bartle. But… you must be careful what you say to him, you know. I'm afraid you have too little fellow-feeling in what you consider his weakness about Hetty.'

'Trust to me, sir — trust to me. I know what you mean. I've been a fool myself in my time, but that's between you and me. I shan't thrust myself on him — only keep my eye on him, and see that he gets some good food, and put in a word here and there.'

'Then,' said Mr Irwine, reassured a little as to Bartle's discretion, 'I think you'll be doing a good deed; and it will be well for you to let Adam's mother and brother know that you're going.'

'Yes, sir, yes,' said Bartle, rising, and taking off his spectacles, 'I'll do that, I'll do that; though the mother's a whimpering thing — I don't like to come within earshot of her; however, she's a straight-backed, clean woman, none of your slatterns. I wish you good-bye, sir, and thank you for the time you've spared me. You're everybody's friend in this business — everybody's friend. It's a heavy weight you've got on your shoulders.'

'Good-bye, Bartle, till we meet at Stoniton, as I daresay we shall.'

Bartle hurried away from the Rectory, evading Carroll's conversational advances, and saying in an exasperated tone to Vixen, whose short legs pattered beside him on the gravel –

'Now, I shall be obliged to take you with me, you good-for-nothing woman. You'd go fretting yourself to death if I left you — you know you would, and perhaps get snapped up by some tramp; and you'll be running into bad company, I expect, putting your nose in every hole and corner where you've no business! but if you do anything disgraceful, I'll disown you – mind that, madam, mind that!'

CHAPTER XLI

The Eve of the Trial

An upper room[1] in a dull Stoniton street, with two beds in it – one laid on the floor. It is ten o'clock on Thursday night, and the dark wall opposite the window shuts out the moonlight that might have struggled with the light of the one dip candle by which Bartle Massey is pretending to read, while he is really looking over his spectacles at Adam Bede, seated near the dark window.

You would hardly have known it was Adam without being told. His face has got thinner this last week: he has the sunken eyes, the neglected beard of a man just risen from a sick-bed. His heavy black hair hangs over his forehead, and there is no active impulse in him which inclines him to push it off, that he may be more awake to what is around him. He has one arm over the back of the chair, and he seems to be looking down at his clasped hands. He is roused by a knock at the door.

'There he is,' said Bartle Massey, rising hastily and unfastening the door. It was Mr Irwine.

Adam rose from his chair with instinctive respect, as Mr Irwine approached him and took his hand.

'I'm late, Adam,' he said, sitting down on the chair which Bartle placed for him; 'but I was later in setting off from Broxton than I intended to be, and I have been incessantly occupied since I arrived. I have done everything now, however — everything that can be done to-night, at least. Let us all sit down.'

Adam took his chair again mechanically, and Bartle, for whom there was no chair remaining, sat on the bed in the background.

'Have you seen her, sir?' said Adam, tremulously.

'Yes, Adam; I and the chaplain have both been with her this evening.'

'Did you ask her, sir… did you say anything about me?'

'Yes,' said Mr Irwine, with some hesitation, 'I spoke of you. I said you wished to see her before the trial, if she consented.'

As Mr Irwine paused, Adam looked at him with eager, questioning eyes.

'You know she shrinks from seeing any one, Adam. It is not only you — some fatal influence seems to have shut up her heart against her fellow-creatures. She has scarcely said anything more than "No", either to me or the chaplain. Three or four days ago, before you were mentioned to her, when I asked her if there was any one of her family whom she would like to see — to whom she could open her mind, she said, with a violent shudder, "Tell them not to come near me — I won't see any of them.'"

Adam's head was hanging down again, and he did not speak. There was silence for a few minutes, and then Mr Irwine said –

'I don't like to advise you against your own feelings, Adam, if they now urge you strongly to go and see her to-morrow morning, even without her consent. It is just possible, notwithstanding appearances to the contrary, that the interview might affect her favourably. But I grieve to say I have scarcely any hope of that. She didn't seem agitated when I mentioned your name; she only said "No", in the same cold, obstinate way as usual. And if the meeting had no good effect on her, it would be pure, useless suffering to you — severe suffering, I fear. She is very much changed'…

Adam started up from his chair, and seized his hat which lay on the table. But he stood still then, and looked at Mr Irwine, as if he had a question to ask, which it was yet difficult to utter. Bartle Massey rose quietly, turned the key in the door, and put it in his pocket.

'Is he come back?' said Adam at last.

'No, he is not,' said Mr Irwine, quietly. 'Lay down your hat, Adam, unless you like to walk out with me for a little fresh air. I fear you have not been out again to-day.'

'You needn't deceive me, sir,' said Adam, looking hard at Mr Irwine, and speaking in a tone of angry suspicion. 'You needn't be afraid of me. I only want justice. I want him to feel what she feels. It's his work… she was a child as it 'ud ha' gone t' anybody's heart to look at… I don't care what she's done… it was him brought her to it. And he shall know it… he shall feel it… if there's a just God, he shall feel what it is t' ha' brought a child like her to sin and misery.'

'I'm not deceiving you, Adam,' said Mr Irwine. 'Arthur Donnithorne is not come back — was not come

back when I left. I have left a letter for him: he will know all as soon as he arrives.'

'But you don't mind about it,' said Adam, indignantly. 'You think it doesn't matter as she lies there in shame and misery, and he knows nothing about it — he suffers nothing.'

'Adam, he *will* know — he *will* suffer, long and bitterly. He has a heart and a conscience: I can't be entirely deceived in his character. I am convinced — I am sure he didn't fall under temptation without a struggle. He may be weak, but he is not callous, not coldly selfish. I am persuaded that this will be a shock of which he will feel the effects all his life. Why do you crave vengeance in this way? No amount of torture that you could inflict on *him* could benefit *her*.'

'No — O God, no,' Adam groaned out, sinking on his chair again; 'but then, that's the deepest curse of all… that's what makes the blackness of it…*it can never be undone.* My poor Hetty… she can never be my sweet Hetty again… the prettiest thing God had made — smiling up at me… I thought she loved me… and was good'…

Adam's voice had been gradually sinking into a hoarse undertone, as if he were only talking to himself; but now he said abruptly, looking at Mr Irwine –

'But she isn't as guilty as they say? You don't think she is, sir? She can't ha' done it.'

'That perhaps can never be known with certainty, Adam,' Mr Irwine answered, gently. 'In these cases we sometimes form our judgement on what seems to us strong evidence, and yet, for want of knowing some small fact, our judgement is wrong. But suppose the worst: you have no right to say that the guilt of her crime lies with him, and that he ought to bear the punishment. It is not for us men to apportion the shares of moral guilt and retribution. We find it impossible to avoid mistakes even in determining who has committed a single criminal act, and the problem how far a man is to be held responsible for the unforeseen consequences of his own deed, is one that might well make us tremble to look into it. The evil consequences that may lie folded in a single act of selfish indulgence, is a thought so awful that it ought surely to awaken some feeling less presumptuous than a rash desire to punish. You have a mind that can understand this fully, Adam, when you are calm. Don't suppose I can't enter into the anguish that drives you into this state of revengeful hatred; but think of this: if you were to obey your passion — for it *is* passion, and you deceive yourself in calling it justice — it might be with you precisely as it has been with Arthur; nay, worse; your passion might lead you yourself into a horrible crime.'

'No, not worse,' said Adam, bitterly; 'I don't believe it's worse — I'd sooner do it — I'd sooner do a wickedness as I could suffer for by myself, than ha' brought *her* to do wickedness and then stand by and see 'em punish her while they let me alone; and all for a bit o' pleasure, as, if he'd had a man's heart in him, he'd ha' cut his hand off sooner than he'd ha' taken it. What if he didn't foresee what's happened? He foresaw enough: he'd no right to expect anything but harm and shame to her. And then he wanted to smooth it off wi' lies. No — there's plenty o' things folks are hanged for, not half so hateful as that: let a man do what he will, if he knows he's to bear the punishment himself, he isn't half so bad as a mean selfish coward as makes things easy t' himself, and knows all the while the punishment 'ull fall on somebody else.'

'There again you partly deceive yourself, Adam. There is no sort of wrong deed of which a man can bear the punishment alone; you can't isolate yourself, and say that the evil which is in you shall not spread. Men's lives are as thoroughly blended[2] with each other as the air they breathe: evil spreads as necessarily as disease. I know, I feel the terrible extent of suffering this sin of Arthur's has caused to others; but so does every sin cause suffering to others besides those who commit it. An act of vengeance on your part against Arthur would simply be another evil added to those we are suffering under: you could not bear the punishment alone; you would entail the worst sorrows on every one who loves you. You would have committed an act of blind fury, that would leave all the present evils just as they were, and add worse evils to them. You may tell me that you meditate no fatal act of vengeance: but the feeling in your mind is what gives birth to such actions, and as long as you indulge it, as long as you do not see that to fix your mind on Arthur's punishment is revenge, and not justice, you are in danger of being led on to the commission of some great wrong. Remember what you told me about your feelings after you had given that blow to Arthur in the Grove.'

Adam was silent: the last words had called up a vivid image of the past, and Mr Irwine left him to his thoughts, while he spoke to Bartle Massey about old Mr Donnithorne's funeral and other matters of an indifferent kind. But at length Adam turned round and said, in a more subdued tone –

'I've not asked about 'em at th' Hall Farm, sir. Is Mr Poyser coming?'

'He is come; he is in Stoniton to-night. But I could not advise him to see you, Adam. His own mind is in a very perturbed state, and it is best he should not see you till you are calmer.'

'Is Dinah Morris come to 'em, sir? Seth said they'd sent for her.'

'No. Mr Poyser tells me she was not come when he left. They're afraid the letter has not reached her. It

seems they had no exact address.'

Adam sat ruminating a little while, and then said –

'I wonder if Dinah 'ud ha' gone to see her. But perhaps the Poysers would ha' been sorely against it, since they won't come nigh her themselves. But I think she would, for the Methodists are great folks for going into the prisons; and Seth said he thought she would. She'd a very tender way with her, Dinah had; I wonder if she could ha' done any good. You never saw her, sir, did you?'

'Yes, I did: I had a conversation with her — she pleased me a good deal. And now you mention it, I wish she would come; for it is possible that a gentle, mild woman like her might move Hetty to open her heart. The jail chaplain is rather harsh in his manner.'

'But it's o' no use if she doesn't come,' said Adam, sadly.

'If I'd thought of it earlier, I would have taken some measures for finding her out,' said Mr Irwine, 'but it's too late now, I fear… Well, Adam, I must go now. Try to get some rest to-night. God bless you. I'll see you early to-morrow morning.'

CHAPTER XLII

The Morning of the Trial

At one o'clock the next day, Adam was alone in his dull upper room; his watch lay before him on the table, as if he were counting the long minutes. He had no knowledge of what was likely to be said by the witnesses on the trial, for he had shrunk from all the particulars connected with Hetty's arrest and accusation. This brave active man, who would have hastened towards any danger or toil to rescue Hetty from an apprehended wrong or misfortune, felt himself powerless to contemplate irremediable evil and suffering. The susceptibility which would have been an impelling force where there was any possibility of action, became helpless anguish when he was obliged to be passive, or else sought an active outlet in the thought of inflicting justice on Arthur. Energetic natures, strong for all strenuous deeds, will often rush away from a hopeless sufferer, as if they were hard-hearted. It is the over-mastering sense of pain that drives them. They shrink by an ungovernable instinct, as they would shrink from laceration. Adam had brought himself to think of seeing Hetty, if she would consent to see him, because he thought the meeting might possibly be a good to her — might help to melt away this terrible hardness they told him of. If she saw he bore her no ill-will for what she had done to him, she might open her heart to him. But this resolution had been an immense effort; he trembled at the thought of seeing her changed face, as a timid woman trembles at the thought of the surgeon's knife; and he chose now to bear the long hours of suspense, rather than encounter what seemed to him the more intolerable agony of witnessing her trial.

Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state. The yearning memories, the bitter regret, the agonized sympathy, the struggling appeals to the Invisible Right — all the intense emotions which had filled the days and nights of the past week, and were compressing themselves again like an eager crowd into the hours of this single morning, made Adam look back on all the previous years as if they had been a dim sleepy existence, and he had only now awaked to full consciousness. It seemed to him as if he had always before thought it a light thing that men should suffer; as if all that he had himself endured and called sorrow before, was only a moment's stroke that had never left a bruise. Doubtless a great anguish may do the work of years, and we may come out from that baptism of fire with a soul full of new awe and new pity.

'O God,' Adam groaned, as he leaned on the table, and looked blankly at the face of the watch, 'and men have suffered like this before… and poor helpless young things have suffered like her…. Such a little while ago looking so happy and so pretty… kissing 'em all, her grandfather and all of 'em, and they wishing her luck…. Oh my poor, poor Hetty… dost think on it now?'

Adam started and looked round towards the door. Vixen had begun to whimper, and there was a sound of a stick and a lame walk on the stairs. It was Bartle Massey come back. Could it be all over?

Bartle entered quietly, and, going up to Adam, grasped his hand and said, 'I'm just come to look at you, my boy, for the folks are gone out of court for a bit.'

Adam's heart beat so violently, he was unable to speak — he could only return the pressure of his friend's hand; and Bartle, drawing up the other chair, came and sat in front of him, taking off his hat and his spectacles.

'That's a thing never happened to me before,' he observed – 'to go out o' door with my spectacles on. I clean forgot to take 'em off.'

The old man made this trivial remark, thinking it better not to respond at all to Adam's agitation: he would gather, in an indirect way, that there was nothing decisive to communicate at present.

'And now,' he said, rising again, 'I must see to your having a bit of the loaf, and some of that wine Mr Irwine sent this morning. He'll be angry with me if you don't have it. Come, now,' he went on, bringing forward the bottle and the loaf, and pouring some wine into a cup, 'I must have a bit and a sup myself. Drink a drop with me, my lad — drink with me.'

Adam pushed the cup gently away, and said, entreatingly, 'Tell me about it, Mr Massey — tell me all about it. Was she there? Have they begun?'

'Yes, my boy, yes — it's taken all the time since I first went; but they're slow, they're slow; and there's the counsel they've got for her puts a spoke in the wheel whenever he can, and makes a deal to do with cross-

examining the witnesses, and quarrelling with the other lawyers. That's all he can do for the money they give him; and it's a big sum — it's a big sum. But he's a 'cute fellow, with an eye that 'ud pick the needles out of the hay in no time. If a man had got no feelings, it 'ud be as good as a demonstration to listen to what goes on in court; but a tender heart makes one stupid. I'd have given up figures for ever only to have had some good news to bring to you, my poor lad.'

'But does it seem to be going against her?' said Adam. 'Tell me what they've said. I must know it now — I must know what they have to bring against her.'

'Why, the chief evidence yet has been the doctors; all but Martin Poyser — poor Martin. Everybody in court felt for him — it it was like one sob, the sound they made when he came down again. The worst was, when they told him to look at the prisoner at the bar. It was hard work, poor fellow — it was hard work. Adam, my boy, the blow falls heavily on him as well as you: you must help poor Martin; you must show courage. Drink some wine now, and show me you mean to bear it like a man.'

Bartle had made the right sort of appeal. Adam, with an air of quiet obedience, took up the cup, and drank a little.

'Tell me how *she* looked,' he said, presently.

'Frightened, very frightened, when they first brought her in; it was the first sight of the crowd and the judge, poor creatur. And there's a lot o' foolish women in fine clothes, with gewgaws all up their arms and feathers on their heads, sitting near the judge: they've dressed themselves out in that way, one 'ud think, to be scarecrows and warnings against any man ever meddling with a woman again; they put up their glasses, and stared and whispered. But after that she stood like a white image, staring down at her hands, and seeming neither to hear nor see anything. And she's as white as a sheet. She didn't speak when they asked her if she'd plead "guilty" or "not guilty", and they pled "not guilty" for her. But when she heard her uncle's name, there seemed to go a shiver right through her; and when they told him to look at her, she hung her head down, and cowered, and hid her face in her hands. He'd much ado to speak, poor man, his voice trembled so. And the counsellors, — who look as hard as nails mostly, – 1 saw, spared him as much as they could. Mr Irwine put himself near him, and went with him out o' court. Ah, it's a great thing in a man's life to be able to stand by a neighbour, and uphold him in such trouble as that.'

'God bless him, and you too, Mr Massey,' said Adam, in a low voice, laying his hand on Bartle's arm.

'Ay, ay, he's good metal; he gives the right ring when you try him, our parson does. A man o' sense — says no more than's needful. He's not one of those that think they can comfort you with chattering, as if folks who stand by and look on knew a deal better what the trouble was than those who have to bear it. I've had to do with such folks in my time — in the south, when I was in trouble myself. Mr Irwine is to be a witness himself, by-and-by, on her side, you know, to speak to her character and bringing up.'

'But the other evidence… does it go hard against her?' said Adam. 'What do you think, Mr Massey? Tell me the truth.'

'Yes, my lad, yes: the truth is the best thing to tell. It must come at last. The doctor's evidence is heavy on her — is heavy. But she's gone on denying she's had a child from first to last: these poor silly women-things — they've not the sense to know it's no use denying what's proved. It'll make against her with the jury, I doubt, her being so obstinate: they may be less for recommending her to mercy, if the verdict's against her. But Mr Irwine '11 leave no stone unturned with the judge — you may rely upon that, Adam.'

'Is there nobody to stand by her, and seem to care for her, in the court?' said Adam.

'There's the chaplain o' the jail sits near her, but he's a sharp ferrety-faced man — another sort o' flesh and blood to Mr Irwine. They say the jail chaplains are mostly the fag-end o' the clergy.'

'There's one man as ought to be there,' said Adam, bitterly. Presently he drew himself up, and looked fixedly out of the window, apparently turning over some new idea in his mind.

'Mr Massey,' he said at last, pushing the hair off his forehead, 'I'll go back with you. I'll go into court. It's cowardly of me to keep away. I'll stand by her — I'll own her — for all she's been deceitful. They oughtn't to cast her off — her own flesh and blood. We hand folks over to God's mercy, and show none ourselves. I used to be hard sometimes: I'll never be hard again. I'll go, Mr Massey — I'll go with you.'

There was a decision in Adam's manner which would have prevented Bartle from opposing him, even if he had wished to do so. He only said –

'Take a bit, then, and another sup, Adam, for the love of me. See, I must stop and eat a morsel. Now, you take some.'

Nerved by an active resolution, Adam took a morsel of bread and drank some wine. He was haggard and unshaven, as he had been yesterday, but he stood upright again, and looked more like the Adam Bede of former days.

CHAPTER XLIII

The Verdict

The place fitted up that day as a court of justice[1] was a grand old hall, now destroyed by fire. The mid-day light that fell on the close pavement of human heads, was shed through a line of high pointed windows, variegated with the mellow tints of old painted glass. Grim dusty armour hung in high relief in front of the dark oaken gallery at the farther end; and under the broad arch of the great mullioned window opposite was spread a curtain of old tapestry, covered with dim melancholy figures, like a dozing indistinct dream of the past. It was a place that through the rest of the year was haunted with the shadowy memories of old kings and queens, unhappy, discrowned, imprisoned; but to-day all those shadows had fled, and not a soul in the vast hall felt the presence of any but a living sorrow, which was quivering in warm hearts.

But that sorrow seemed to have made itself feebly felt hitherto, now when Adam Bede's tall figure was suddenly seen, being ushered to the side of the prisoner's dock. In the broad sunlight of the great hall, among the sleek shaven faces of other men, the marks of suffering in his face were startling even to Mr Irwine, who had last seen him in the dim light of his small room; and the neighbours from Hayslope who were present, and who told Hetty Sorrel's story by their fire-sides in their old age, never forgot to say how it moved them when Adam Bede, poor fellow, taller by the head than most of the people round him, came into court, and took his place by her side.

But Hetty did not see him. She was standing in the same position Bartle Massey had described, her hands crossed over each other, and her eyes fixed on them. Adam had not dared to look at her in the first moments, but at last, when the attention of the court was withdrawn by the proceedings, he turned his face towards her with a resolution not to shrink.

Why did they say she was so changed? In the corpse we love, it is the *likeness* we see — it is the likeness, which makes itself felt the more keenly because something else *was* and *is not.* There they were — the sweet face and neck, with the dark tendrils of hair, the long dark lashes, the rounded cheek and the pouting lips: pale and thin — yes — but like Hetty, and only Hetty. Others thought she looked as if some demon had cast a blighting glance upon her, withered up the woman's soul in her, and left only a hard despairing obstinacy. But the mother's yearning, that completest type of the life in another life which is the essence of real human love, feels the presence of the cherished child even in the debased, degraded man; and to Adam, this pale, hard-looking culprit was the Hetty who had smiled at him in the garden under the apple-tree boughs — she was that Hetty's corpse, which he had trembled to look at the first time, and then was unwilling to turn away his eyes from.

But presently he heard something that compelled him to listen, and made the sense of sight less absorbing. A woman was in the witness-box, a middle-aged woman, who spoke in a firm distinct voice. She said –

'My name is Sarah Stone. I am a widow, and keep a small shop licensed to sell tobacco, snuff, and tea, in Church Lane, Stoniton. The prisoner at the bar is the same young woman who came, looking ill and tired, with a basket on her arm, and asked for a lodging at my house on Saturday evening, the 27th of February. She had taken the house for a public, because there was a figure against the door.[2] And when I said I didn't take in lodgers, the prisoner began to cry, and said she was too tired to go anywhere else, and she only wanted a bed for one night. And her prettiness, and her condition, and something respectable about her clothes and looks, and the trouble she seemed to be in, made me as I couldn't find in my heart to send her away at once. I asked her to sit down, and gave her some tea, and asked her where she was going, and where her friends were. She said she was going home to her friends: they were farming folks a good way off, and she'd had a long journey that had cost her more money than she expected, so as she'd hardly any money left in her pocket, and was afraid of going where it would cost her much. She had been obliged to sell most of the things out of her basket; but she'd thankfully give a shilling for a bed. I saw no reason why I shouldn't take the young woman in for the night. I had only one room, but there were two beds in it, and I told her she might stay with me. I thought she'd been led wrong, and got into trouble, but if she was going to her friends, it would be a good work to keep her out of further harm.'

The witness then stated that in the night a child was born, and she identified the baby-clothes then shown

to her as those in which she had herself dressed the child.

'Those are the clothes. I made them myself, and had kept them by me ever since my last child was born. I took a deal of trouble both for the child and the mother. I couldn't help taking to the little thing and being anxious about it. I didn't send for a doctor, for there seemed no need. I told the mother in the day-time she must tell me the name of her friends, and where they lived, and let me write to them. She said, by-and-by she would write herself, but not to-day. She would have no nay, but she would get up and be dressed, in spite of everything I could say. She said she felt quite strong enough; and it was wonderful what spirit she showed. But I wasn't quite easy what I should do about her, and towards evening I made up my mind I'd go, after Meeting was over, and speak to our minister[3] about it. I left the house about half-past eight o'clock. I didn't go out at the shop door, but at the back door, which opens into a narrow alley. I've only got the ground-floor of the house, and the kitchen and bedroom both look into the alley. I left the prisoner sitting up by the fire in the kitchen with the baby on her lap. She hadn't cried or seemed low at all, as she did the night before. I thought she had a strange look with her eyes, and she got a bit flushed towards evening. I was afraid of the fever,[4] and I thought I'd call and ask an acquaintance of mine, an experienced woman, to come back with me when I went out. It was a very dark night. I didn't fasten the door behind me: there was no lock: it was a latch with a bolt inside, and when there was nobody in the house I always went out at the shop door. But I thought there was no danger in leaving it unfastened that little while. I was longer than I meant to be, for I had to wait for the woman that came back with me. It was an hour and a half before we got back, and when we went in, the candle was standing burning just as I left it, but the prisoner and the baby were both gone. She'd taken her cloak and bonnet, but she'd left the basket and the things in it.… I was dreadful frightened, and angry with her for going. I didn't go to give information, because I'd no thought she meant to do any harm, and I knew she had money in her pocket to buy her food and lodging. I didn't like to set the constable after her, for she'd a right to go from me if she liked.'

The effect of this evidence on Adam was electrical; it gave him new force. Hetty could not be guilty of the crime — her heart must have clung to her baby — else why should she have taken it with her? She might have left it behind. The little creature had died naturally, and then she had hidden it: babies were so liable to death — and there might be the strongest suspicions without any proof of guilt. His mind was so occupied with imaginary arguments against such suspicions, that he could not listen to the cross-examination by Hetty's counsel, who tried, without result, to elicit evidence that the prisoner had shown some movements of maternal affection towards the child. The whole time this witness was being examined, Hetty had stood as motionless as before: no word seemed to arrest her ear. But the sound of the next witness's voice touched a chord that was still sensitive; she gave a start and a frightened look towards him, but immediately turned away her head and looked down at her hands as before. This witness was a man, a rough peasant. He said –

'My name is John Olding. I am a labourer, and live at Tedd's Hole, two miles out of Stoniton. A week last Monday, towards one o'clock in the afternoon, I was going towards Hetton Coppice, and about a quarter of a mile from the coppice I saw the prisoner, in a red cloak, sitting under a bit of a haystack not far off the stile. She got up when she saw me, and seemed as if she'd be walking on the other way. It was a regular road through the fields, and nothing very uncommon to see a young woman there, but I took notice of her because she looked white and scared. I should have thought she was a beggar-woman, only for her good clothes. I thought she looked a bit crazy, but it was no business of mine. I stood and looked back after her, but she went right on while she was in sight. I had to go to the other side of the coppice to look after some stakes.[5] There's a road right through it, and bits of openings here and there, where the trees have been cut down, and some of 'em not carried away. I didn't go straight along the road, but turned off towards the middle, and took a shorter way towards the spot I wanted to get to. I hadn't got far out of the road into one of the open places, before I heard a strange cry. I thought it didn't come from any animal I knew, but I wasn't for stopping to look about just then. But it went on, and seemed so strange to me in that place, I couldn't help stopping to look. I began to think I might make some money of it, if it was a new thing. But I had hard work to tell which way it came from, and for a good while I kept looking up at the boughs. And then I thought it came from the ground; and there was a lot of timber-choppings lying about, and loose pieces of turf, and a trunk or two. And I looked about among them, but could find nothing; and at last the cry stopped. So I was for giving it up, and I went on about my business. But when I came back the same way pretty nigh an hour after, I couldn't help laying down my stakes to have another look. And just as I was stooping and laying down the stakes, I saw something odd and round and whitish lying on the ground under a nut-bush by the side of me. And I stooped down on hands and knees to pick it up. And I saw it was a little baby's hand.'

At these words a thrill ran through the court. Hetty was visibly trembling: now, for the first time, she seemed to be listening to what a witness said.

‘There was a lot of timber-choppings put together just where the ground went hollow, like, under the bush, and the hand came out from among them. But there was a hole left in one place, and I could see down it, and see the child’s head; and I made haste and did away the turf and the choppings, and took out the child. It had got comfortable clothes on, but its body was cold, and I thought it must be dead. I made haste back with it out of the wood, and took it home to my wife. She said it was dead, and I’d better take it to the parish and tell the constable. And I said, “I’ll lay my life it’s that young woman’s child as I met going to the coppice.” But she seemed to be gone clean out of sight. And I took the child on to Hetton parish and told the constable,[6] and we went on to Justice Hardy. And then we went looking after the young woman till dark at night, and we went and gave information at Stoniton, as they might stop her. And the next morning another constable came to me, to go with him to the spot where I found the child. And when we got there, there was the prisoner a-sitting against the bush where I found the child; and she cried out when she saw us, but she never offered to move. She’d got a big piece of bread on her lap.’

Adam had given a faint groan of despair while this witness was speaking. He had hidden his face on his arm, which rested on the boarding in front of him. It was the supreme moment of his suffering: Hetty was guilty: and he was silently calling to God for help. He heard no more of the evidence, and was unconscious when the case for the prosecution had closed — unconscious that Mr Irwine was in the witness-box, telling of Hetty’s unblemished character in her own parish, and of the virtuous habits in which she had been brought up. This testimony could have no influence on the verdict, but it was given as part of that plea for mercy which her own counsel would have made if he had been allowed to speak for her — a favour not granted to criminals in those stern times.[7]

At last Adam lifted up his head, for there was a general movement round him. The judge had addressed the jury, and they were retiring. The decisive moment was not far off. Adam felt a shuddering horror that would not let him look at Hetty, but she had long relapsed into her blank hard indifference. All eyes were strained to look at her, but she stood like a statue of dull despair.

There was a mingled rustling, whispering, and low buzzing throughout the court during this interval. The desire to listen was suspended, and every one had some feeling or opinion to express in under-tones. Adam sat looking blankly before him, but he did not see the objects that were right in front of his eyes — the counsel and attorneys talking with an air of cool business, and Mr Irwine in low earnest conversation with the judge: did not see Mr Irwine sit down again in agitation, and shake his head mournfully when somebody whispered to him. The inward action was too intense for Adam to take in outward objects until some strong sensation roused him.

It was not very long, hardly more than a quarter of an hour, before the knock which told that the jury had come to their decision, fell as a signal for silence on every ear. It is sublime – that sudden pause of a great multitude, which tells that one soul moves in them all. Deeper and deeper the silence seemed to become, like the deepening night, while the jurymen’s names were called over, and the prisoner was made to hold up her hand, and the jury were asked for their verdict.

‘Guilty.’

It was the verdict every one expected, but there was a sigh of disappointment from some hearts, that it was followed by no recommendation to mercy. Still the sympathy of the court was not with the prisoner: the unnaturalness of her crime stood out the more harshly by the side of her hard immovability and obstinate silence. Even the verdict, to distant eyes, had not appeared to move her; but those who were near saw her trembling.

The stillness was less intense until the judge put on his black cap, and the chaplain in his canonicals[8] was observed behind him. Then it deepened again, before the crier had had time to command silence. If any sound were heard, it must have been the sound of beating hearts. The judge spoke –

‘Hester Sorrel.’…

The blood rushed to Hetty’s face, and then fled back again, as she looked up at the judge, and kept her wide-open eyes fixed on him, as if fascinated by fear. Adam had not yet turned towards her: there was a deep horror, like a great gulf, between them. But at the words — ‘and then to be hanged by the neck till you be dead’, a piercing shriek rang through the hall. It was Hetty’s shriek. Adam started to his feet and stretched out his arms towards her; but the arms could not reach her: she had fallen down in a fainting-fit, and was carried out of court.

CHAPTER XLIV

Arthur's Return

When Arthur Donnithorne landed at Liverpool, and read the letter from his aunt Lydia, briefly announcing his grandfather's death, his first feeling was, 'Poor grandfather! I wish I could have got to him to be with him when he died. He might have felt or wished something at the last that I shall never know now. It was a lonely death.'

It is impossible to say that his grief was deeper than that. Pity and softened memory took place of the old antagonism, and in his busy thoughts about the future, as the chaise carried him rapidly along towards the home where he was now to be master, there was a continually recurring effort to remember anything by which he could show a regard for his grandfather's wishes, without counteracting his own cherished aims for the good of the tenants and the estate. But it is not in human nature — only in human pretence — for a young man like Arthur, with a fine constitution and fine spirits, thinking well of himself, believing that others think well of him, and having a very ardent intention to give them more and more reason for that good opinion, — it is not possible for such a young man, just coming into a splendid estate through the death of a very old man whom he was not fond of, to feel anything very different from exultant joy. *Now* his real life was beginning; now he would have room and opportunity for action, and he would use them. He would show the Loamshire people what a fine country gentleman was; he would not exchange that career for any other under the sun. He felt himself riding over the hills in the breezy autumn days, looking after favourite plans of drainage and enclosure; then admired on sombre mornings as the best rider on the best horse in the hunt; spoken well of on market-days as a first-rate landlord; by-and-by making speeches at election dinners, and showing a wonderful knowledge of agriculture; the patron of new ploughs and drills, the severe upbraider of negligent landowners, and withal a jolly fellow that everybody must like, – happy faces greeting him everywhere on his own estate, and the neighbouring families on the best terms with him. The Irwines should dine with him every week, and have their own carriage to come in, for in some very delicate way that Arthur would devise, the lay-impropriator of the Hayslope tithes[1] would insist on paying a couple of hundreds more to the Vicar; and his aunt should be as comfortable as possible, and go on living at the Chase, if she liked, in spite of her old-maidish ways, — at least until he was married; and that event lay in the indistinct background, for Arthur had not yet seen the woman who would play the lady-wife to the first-rate country gentleman.

These were Arthur's chief thoughts, so far as a man's thoughts through hours of travelling can be compressed into a few sentences, which are only like the list of names telling you what are the scenes in a long, long panorama, full of colour, of detail, and of life. The happy faces Arthur saw greeting him were not pale abstractions, but real ruddy faces, long familiar to him: Martin Poyser was there — the whole Poyser family.

What — Hetty?

Yes; for Arthur was at ease about Hetty: not quite at ease about the past, for a certain burning of the ears would come whenever he thought of the scenes with Adam last August, – but at ease about her present lot. Mr Irwine, who had been a regular correspondent, telling him all the news about the old places and people, had sent him word nearly three months ago that Adam Bede was not to marry Mary Bürge, as he had thought, but pretty Hetty Sorrel. Martin Poyser and Adam himself had both told Mr Irwine all about it; — that Adam had been deeply in love with Hetty these two years, and that now it was agreed they were to be married in March. That stalwart rogue Adam was more susceptible than the Rector had thought; it was really quite an idyllic love affair; and if it had not been too long to tell in a letter, he would have liked to describe to Arthur the blushing looks and the simple strong words with which the fine honest fellow told his secret. He knew Arthur would like to hear that Adam had this sort of happiness in prospect.

Yes, indeed! Arthur felt there was not air enough in the room to satisfy his renovated life, when he had read that passage in the letter. He threw up the windows, he rushed out of doors into the December air, and greeted every one who spoke to him with an eager gaiety, as if there had been news of a fresh Nelson victory. For the first time that day since he had come to Windsor, he was in true boyish spirits: the load that had been pressing upon him was gone; the haunting fear had vanished. He thought he could conquer his

bitterness towards Adam now — could offer him his hand, and ask to be his friend again, in spite of that painful memory which would still make his ears burn. He had been knocked down, and he had been forced to tell a lie: such things make a scar, do what we will. But if Adam were the same again as in the old days, Arthur wished to be the same too, and to have Adam mixed up with his business and his future, as he had always desired before that accursed meeting in August. Nay, he would do a great deal more for Adam than he should otherwise have done, when he came into the estate; Hetty's husband had a special claim on him — Hetty herself should feel that any pain she had suffered through Arthur in the past, was compensated to her a hundredfold. For really she could not have felt much, since she had so soon made up her mind to marry Adam.

You perceive clearly what sort of picture Adam and Hetty made in the panorama of Arthur's thoughts on his journey homeward. It was March now; they were soon to be married: perhaps they were already married. And *now* it was actually in his power to do a great deal for them. Sweet — sweet little Hetty! The little puss hadn't cared for him half as much as he cared for her; for he was a great fool about her still — was almost afraid of seeing her — indeed, had not cared much to look at any other woman since he parted from her. That little figure coming towards him in the Grove, those dark-fringed childish eyes, the lovely lips put up to kiss him — that picture had got no fainter with the lapse of months. And she would look just the same. It was impossible to think how he could meet her: he should certainly tremble. Strange, how long this sort of influence lasts; for he was certainly not in love with Hetty now: he had been earnestly desiring, for months, that she should marry Adam, and there was nothing that contributed more to his happiness in these moments than the thought of their marriage. It was the exaggerating effect of imagination that made his heart still beat a little more quickly at the thought of her. When he saw the little thing again, as she really was, as Adam's wife, at work quite prosaically in her new home, he should perhaps wonder at the possibility of his past feelings. Thank heaven it had turned out so well! He should have plenty of affairs and interests to fill his life now, and not be in danger of playing the fool again.

Pleasant the crack of the postboy's whip! Pleasant the sense of being hurried along in swift ease through English scenes, so like those round his own home, only not quite so charming. Here was a market-town — very much like Treddleston — where the arms of the neighbouring lord of the manor were borne on the sign of the principal inn: then mere fields and hedges, their vicinity to a market-town carrying an agreeable suggestion of high rent, till the land began to assume a trimmer look, the woods were more frequent, and at length a white or red mansion looked down from a moderate eminence, or allowed him to be aware of its parapet and chimneys among the dense-looking masses of oaks and elms — masses reddened now with early buds. And close at hand came the village: the small church, with its red-tiled roof, looking humble even among the faded half-timbered houses; the old green grave-stones with nettles round them; nothing fresh and bright but the children, opening round eyes at the swift post-chaise; nothing noisy and busy but the gaping curs of mysterious pedigree. What a much prettier village Hayslope was! And it should not be neglected like this place: vigorous repairs should go on everywhere among farm-buildings and cottages, and travellers in post-chaises, coming along the Rosseter road, should do nothing but admire as they went. And Adam Bede should superintend all the repairs, for he had a share in Burge's business now, and, if he liked, Arthur would put some money into the concern, and buy the old man out in another year or two. That was an ugly fault in Arthur's life, that affair last summer; but the future should make amends. Many men would have retained a feeling of vindictiveness towards Adam; but *be* would not — he would resolutely overcome all littleness of that kind, for he had certainly been very much in the wrong; and though Adam had been harsh and violent, and had thrust on him a painful dilemma, the poor fellow was in love, and had real provocation. No; Arthur had not an evil feeling in his mind towards any human being: he was happy, and would make every one else happy that came within his reach.

And here was dear old Hayslope at last, sleeping on the hill, like a quiet old place as it was, in the late afternoon sunlight; and opposite to it the great shoulders of the Binton Hills, below them the purplish blackness of the hanging woods, and at last the pale front of the Abbey, looking out from among the oaks of the Chase, as if anxious for the heir's return. 'Poor grandfather! and he lies dead there. *He* was a young fellow once, coming into the estate, and making his plans. So the world goes round! Aunt Lydia must feel very desolate, poor thing; but she shall be indulged as much as she indulges her fat Fido.'

The wheels of Arthur's chaise had been anxiously listened for at the Chase, for to-day was Friday, and the funeral had already been deferred two days. Before it drew up on the gravel of the courtyard, all the servants in the house were assembled to receive him with a grave, decent welcome, befitting a house of death. A month ago, perhaps, it would have been difficult for them to have maintained a suitable sadness in their faces, when Mr Arthur was come to take possession; but the hearts of the head-servants were heavy that day for another cause than the death of the old Squire, and more than one of them was longing to be twenty miles away, as Mr Craig was, knowing what was to become of Hetty Sorrel — pretty Hetty Sorrel –

whom they used to see every week. They had the partisanship of household servants who like their places, and were not inclined to go the full length of the severe indignation felt against him by the farming tenants, but rather to make excuses for him; nevertheless, the upper servants, who had been on terms of neighbourly intercourse with the Poysers for many years, could not help feeling that the longed-for event of the young Squire's coming into the estate had been robbed of all its pleasantness.

To Arthur it was nothing surprising that the servants looked grave and sad: he himself was very much touched on seeing them all again, and feeling that he was in a new relation to them. It was that sort of pathetic emotion which has more pleasure than pain in it — which is perhaps one of the most delicious of all states to a good-natured man, conscious of the power to satisfy his good-nature. His heart swelled agreeably as he said –

'Well, Mills, how is my aunt?'

But now Mr Bygate, the lawyer, who had been in the house ever since the death, came forward to give deferential greetings and answer all questions, and Arthur walked with him towards the library, where his aunt Lydia was expecting him. Aunt Lydia was the only person in the house who knew nothing about Hetty: her sorrow as a maiden daughter was unmixed with any other thoughts than those of anxiety about funeral arrangements and her own future lot; and, after the manner of women, she mourned for the father who had made her life important, all the more because she had a secret sense that there was little mourning for him in other hearts.

But Arthur kissed her tearful face more tenderly than he had ever done in his life before.

'Dear aunt,' he said affectionately, as he held her hand, '*your* loss is the greatest of all, but you must tell me how to try and make it up to you all the rest of your life.'

'It was so sudden and so dreadful, Arthur,' poor Miss Lydia began, pouring out her little plaints; and Arthur sat down to listen with impatient patience. When a pause came, he said –

'Now, aunt, I'll leave you for a quarter of an hour just to go to my own room, and then I shall come and give full attention to everything.'

'My room is all ready for me, I suppose, Mills?' he said to the butler, who seemed to be lingering uneasily about the entrance-hall.

'Yes, sir, and there are letters for you; they are all laid on the writing-table in your dressing-room.'

On entering the small anteroom which was called a dressing-room, but which Arthur really used only to lounge and write in, he just cast his eyes on the writing-table, and saw that there were several letters and packets lying there; but he was in the uncomfortable dusty condition of a man who has had a long hurried journey, and he must really refresh himself by attending to his toilette a little, before he read his letters. Pym was there, making everything ready for him; and soon, with a delightful freshness about him, as if he were prepared to begin a new day, he went back into his dressing-room to open his letters. The level rays of the low afternoon sun entered directly at the window, and as Arthur seated himself in his velvet chair with their pleasant warmth upon him, he was conscious of that quiet wellbeing which perhaps you and I have felt on a sunny afternoon, when, in our brightest youth and health, life has opened a new vista for us, and long to-morrows of activity have stretched before us like a lovely plain which there was no need for hurrying to look at, because it was all our own.

The top letter was placed with its address upwards: it was in Mr Irwine's handwriting, Arthur saw at once; and below the address was written, 'To be delivered as soon as he arrives'. Nothing could have been less surprising to him than a letter from Mr Irwine at that moment: of course there was something he wished Arthur to know earlier than it was possible for them to see each other. At such a time as that it was quite natural that Irwine should have something pressing to say. Arthur broke the seal with an agreeable anticipation of soon seeing the writer.

> *'I send this letter to meet you on your arrival, Arthur, because I may then be at Stoniton, whither I am called by the most painful duty it has ever been given me to perform; and it is right that you should know what I have to tell you without delay.*
>
> *'I will not attempt to add by one word of reproach to the retribution that is now falling on you: any other words that I could write at this moment must be weak and unmeaning by the side of those in which I must tell you the simple fact.*
>
> *'Hetty Sorrel is in prison, and will be tried on Friday for the crime of child-murder.'…*

Arthur read no more. He started up from his chair, and stood for a single minute with a sense of violent convulsion in his whole frame, as if the life were going out of him with horrible throbs; but the next minute he had rushed out of the room, still clutching the letter — he was hurrying along the corridor, and down the stairs into the hall. Mills was still there, but Arthur did not see him, as he passed like a hunted man across the hall and out along the gravel. The butler hurried out after him as fast as his elderly limbs could run: he guessed, he knew, where the young Squire was going.

When Mills got to the stables, a horse was being saddled, and Arthur was forcing himself to read the remaining words of the letter. He thrust it into his pocket as the horse was led up to him, and at that moment caught sight of Mills's anxious face in front of him.

'Tell them I'm gone — gone to Stoniton,' he said, in a muffled tone of agitation — sprang into the saddle, and set off at a gallop.

CHAPTER XLV

In the Prison

Near sunset that evening an elderly gentleman was standing with his back against the smaller entrance-door of Stoniton jail, saying a few last words to the departing chaplain. The chaplain walked away, but the elderly gentleman stood still, looking down on the pavement, and stroking his chin with a ruminating air, when he was roused by a sweet clear woman's voice, saying –

'Can I get into the prison, if you please?'

He turned his head, and looked fixedly at the speaker for a few moments without answering.

'I have seen you before,' he said at last. 'Do you remember preaching on the village green at Hayslope in Loamshire?'

'Yes, sir, surely. Are you the gentleman that stayed to listen on horseback?'

'Yes. Why do you want to go into the prison?'

'I want to go to Hetty Sorrel, the young woman who has been condemned to death — and to stay with her, if I may be permitted. Have you power in the prison, sir?'

'Yes; I am a magistrate, and can get admittance for you. But did you know this criminal, Hetty Sorrel?'

'Yes, we are kin: my own aunt married her uncle, Martin Poyser. But I was away at Leeds, and didn't know of this great trouble in time to get here before to-day. I entreat you, sir, for the love of our heavenly Father, to let me go to her and stay with her.'

'How did you know she was condemned to death, if you are only just come from Leeds?'

'I have seen my uncle since the trial, sir. He is gone back to his home now, and the poor sinner is forsaken of all. I beseech you to get leave for me to be with her.'

'What! have you courage to stay all night in the prison? She is very sullen, and will scarcely make answer when she is spoken to.'

'Oh, sir, it may please God to open her heart still. Don't let us delay.'

'Come, then,' said the elderly gentleman, ringing and gaining admission; 'I know you have a key to unlock hearts.'

Dinah mechanically took off her bonnet and shawl as soon as they were within the prison court, from the habit she had of throwing them off when she preached or prayed, or visited the sick; and when they entered the jailer's room, she laid them down on a chair unthinkingly. There was no agitation visible in her, but a deep concentrated calmness, as if, even when she was speaking, her soul was in prayer reposing on an unseen support.

After speaking to the jailer, the magistrate turned to her and said, 'The turnkey will take you to the prisoner's cell, and leave you there for the night, if you desire it; but you can't have a light during the night — it is contrary to rules. My name is Colonel Townley: if I can help you in anything, ask the jailer for my address, and come to me. I take some interest in this Hetty Sorrel, for the sake of that fine fellow, Adam Bede: I happened to see him at Hayslope the same evening I heard you preach, and recognized him in court to-day, ill as he looked.'

'Ah, sir, can you tell me anything about him? Can you tell me where he lodges? For my poor uncle was too much weighed down with trouble to remember.'

'Close by here. I inquired all about him of Mr Irwine. He lodges over a tinman's shop, in the street on the right hand as you entered the prison. There is an old schoolmaster with him. Now, good-bye: I wish you success.'

'Farewell, sir. I am grateful to you.'

As Dinah crossed the prison court with the turnkey, the solemn evening light seemed to make the walls higher than they were by day, and the sweet pale face in the cap was more than ever like a white flower on this background of gloom. The turnkey looked askance at her all the while, but never spoke: he somehow felt that the sound of his own rude voice would be grating just then. He struck a light as they entered the dark corridor leading to the condemned cell,[1] and then said in his most civil tone, 'It'll be pretty nigh dark in the cell a'ready; but I can stop with my light a bit, if you like.'

‘Nay, friend, thank you,’ said Dinah. ‘I wish to go in alone.’

‘As you like,’ said the jailer, turning the harsh key in the lock, and opening the door wide enough to admit Dinah. A jet of light from his lantern fell on the opposite corner of the cell, where Hetty was sitting on her straw pallet with her face buried in her knees. It seemed as if she were asleep, and yet the grating of the lock would have been likely to waken her.

The door closed again, and the only light in the cell was that of the evening sky, through the small high grating — enough to discern human faces by. Dinah stood still for a minute, hesitating to speak, because Hetty might be asleep; and looking at the motionless heap with a yearning heart. Then she said, softly –

‘Hetty!’

There was a slight movement perceptible in Hetty’s frame – a start such as might have been produced by a feeble electrical shock; but she did not look up. Dinah spoke again, in a tone made stronger by irrepressible emotion –

‘Hetty… it’s Dinah.’

Again there was a slight, startled movement through Hetty’s frame, and without uncovering her face, she raised her head a little, as if listening.

‘Hetty… Dinah is come to you.’

After a moment’s pause, Hetty lifted her head slowly and timidly from her knees, and raised her eyes. The two pale faces were looking at each other: one with a wild hard despair in it, the other full of sad, yearning love. Dinah unconsciously opened her arms and stretched them out.

‘Don’t you know me, Hetty? Don’t you remember Dinah? Did you think I wouldn’t come to you in trouble?’

Hetty kept her eyes fixed on Dinah’s face, — at first like an animal that gazes, and gazes, and keeps aloof.

‘I’m come to be with you, Hetty — not to leave you — to stay with you — to be your sister to the last.’

Slowly, while Dinah was speaking, Hetty rose, took a step forward, and was clasped in Dinah’s arms.

They stood so a long while, for neither of them felt the impulse to move apart again. Hetty, without any distinct thought of it, hung on this something that was come to clasp her now, while she was sinking helpless in a dark gulf; and Dinah felt a deep joy in the first sign that her love was welcomed by the wretched lost one. The light got fainter as they stood, and when at last they sat down on the straw pallet together, their faces had become indistinct.

Not a word was spoken. Dinah waited, hoping for a spontaneous word from Hetty; but she sat in the same dull despair, only clutching the hand that held hers, and leaning her cheek against Dinah’s. It was the human contact she clung to, but she was not the less sinking into the dark gulf.

Dinah began to doubt whether Hetty was conscious who it was that sat beside her. She thought suffering and fear might have driven the poor sinner out of her mind. But it was borne in upon her, as she afterwards said, that she must not hurry God’s work: we are over-hasty to speak — as if God did not manifest himself by our silent feeling, and make his love felt through ours. She did not know how long they sat in that way, but it got darker and darker, till there was only a pale patch of light on the opposite wall: all the rest was darkness. But she felt the Divine presence more and more, — nay, as if she herself were a part of it, and it was the Divine pity that was beating in her heart, and was willing the rescue of this helpless one. At last she was prompted to speak, and find out how far Hetty was conscious of the present.

‘Hetty,’ she said, gently, ‘do you know who it is that sits by your side?’

‘Yes,’ Hetty answered, slowly, ‘it’s Dinah.’

‘And do you remember the time when we were at the Hall Farm together, and that night when I told you to be sure and think of me as a friend in trouble?’

‘Yes,’ said Hetty. Then, after a pause, she added, ‘But you can do nothing for me. You can’t make ’em do anything. They’ll hang me o’ Monday — it’s Friday now.’

As Hetty said the last words, she clung closer to Dinah, shuddering.

‘No, Hetty, I can’t save you from that death. But isn’t the suffering less hard when you have somebody with you, that feels for you — that you can speak to, and say what’s in your heart?… Yes, Hetty: you lean on me: you are glad to have me with you.’

‘You won’t leave me, Dinah? You’ll keep close to me?’

‘No, Hetty, I won’t leave you. I’ll stay with you to the last…. But, Hetty, there is some one else in this cell besides me, some one close to you.’

Hetty said, in a frightened whisper, ‘Who?’

‘Some one who has been with you through all your hours of sin and trouble — who has known every thought you have had — has seen where you went, where you lay down and rose up again, and all the

deeds you have tried to hide in darkness. And on Monday, when I can't follow you, — when my arms can't reach you, — when death has parted us, — He who is with us now, and knows all, will be with you then. It makes no difference – whether we live or die, we are in the presence of God.'

'O Dinah, won't nobody do anything for me? *Will* they hang me for certain?… I wouldn't mind if they'd let me live.'

'My poor Hetty, death is very dreadful to you. I know it's dreadful. But if you had a friend to take care of you after death — in that other world — some one whose love is greater than mine — who can do everything?… If God our Father was your friend, and was willing to save you from sin and suffering, so as you should neither know wicked feelings nor pain again? If you could believe he loved you and would help you, as you believe I love you and will help you, it wouldn't be so hard to die on Monday, would it?'

'But I can't know anything about it,' Hetty said, with sullen sadness.

'Because, Hetty, you are shutting up your soul against him, by trying to hide the truth. God's love and mercy can overcome all things — our ignorance, and weakness, and all the burthen of our past wickedness — all things but our wilful sin; sin that we cling to, and will not give up. You believe in my love and pity for you, Hetty; but if you had not let me come near you, if you wouldn't have looked at me or spoken to me, you'd have shut me out from helping you: I couldn't have made you feel my love; I couldn't have told you what I felt for you. Don't shut God's love out in that way, by clinging to sin…. He can't bless you while you have one falsehood in your soul; his pardoning mercy can't reach you until you open your heart to him, and say, "I have done this great wickedness; O God, save me, make me pure from sin."[2] While you cling to one sin and will not part with it, it must drag you down to misery after death, as it has dragged you to misery here in this world, my poor, poor Hetty. It is sin that brings dread, and darkness, and despair: there is light and blessedness for us as soon as we cast it off: God enters our souls then, and teaches us, and brings us strength and peace. Cast it off now, Hetty — now: confess the wickedness you have done — the sin you have been guilty of against your heavenly Father. Let us kneel down together, for we are in the presence of God.'

Hetty obeyed Dinah's movement, and sank on her knees. They still held each other's hands, and there was long silence. Then Dinah said –

'Hetty, we are before God: he is waiting for you to tell the truth.'

Still there was silence. At last Hetty spoke, in a tone of beseeching –

'Dinah… help me… I can't feel anything like you… my heart is hard.'

Dinah held the clinging hand, and all her soul went forth in her voice:

'Jesus, thou present Saviour! Thou hast known the depths of all sorrow: thou hast entered that black darkness where God is not, and hast uttered the cry of the forsaken.[3] Come, Lord, and gather of the fruits of thy travail and thy pleading: stretch forth thy hand, thou who art mighty to save to the uttermost, and rescue this lost one. She is clothed round with thick darkness: the fetters of her sin are upon her, and she cannot stir to come to thee: she can only feel her heart is hard, and she is helpless. She cries to me, thy weak creature…. Saviour! it is a blind cry to thee. Hear it! Pierce the darkness! Look upon her with thy face of love and sorrow that thou didst turn on him who denied thee;[4] and melt her hard heart.

'See, Lord, — I bring her, as they of old brought the sick and helpless, and thou didst heal them:[5]1 bear her on my arms and carry her before thee. Fear and trembling have taken hold on her; but she trembles only at the pain and death of the body: breathe upon her thy life-giving Spirit, and put a new fear within her — the fear of her sin. Make her dread to keep the accursed thing within her soul: make her feel the presence of the living God, who beholds all the past, to whom the darkness is as noonday;[6] who is wanting now, at the eleventh hour,[7] for her to turn to him, and confess her sin, and cry for mercy – now, before the night of death comes, and the moment of pardon is for ever fled, like yesterday that returneth not.

'Saviour! it is yet time — time to snatch this poor soul from everlasting darkness. I believe — I believe in thy infinite love. What is *my* love or *my* pleading? It is quenched in thine. I can only clasp her in my weak arms, and urge her with my weak pity. Thou — thou wilt breathe on the dead soul, and it shall arise from the unanswering sleep of death.

'Yea, Lord, I see thee, coming through the darkness, coming, like the morning, with healing on thy wings.[8] The marks of thy agony are upon thee — I see, I see thou art able and willing to save — thou wilt not let her perish for ever.

'Come, mighty Saviour! let the dead hear thy voice; let the eyes of the blind be opened:[9] let her see that God encompasses her; let her tremble at nothing but at the sin that cuts her off from him. Melt the hard heart; unseal the closed lips: make her cry with her whole soul, "Father, I have sinned."[10]…'

‘Dinah,’ Hetty sobbed out, throwing her arms round Dinah’s neck, ‘I will speak… I will tell… I won’t hide it any more.’

But the tears and sobs were too violent. Dinah raised her gently from her knees, and seated her on the pallet again, sitting down by her side. It was a long time before the convulsed throat was quiet, and even then they sat some time in stillness and darkness, holding each other’s hands. At last Hetty whispered –

‘I did do it, Dinah… I buried it in the wood… the little baby… and it cried… I heard it cry… ever such a way off… all night… and I went back because it cried.’

She paused, and then spoke hurriedly in a louder, pleading tone.

‘But I thought perhaps it wouldn’t die — there might somebody find it. I didn’t kill it — I didn’t kill it myself. I put it down there and covered it up, and when I came back it was gone…. It was because I was so very miserable, Dinah… I didn’t know where to go… and I tried to kill myself before, and I couldn’t. Oh, I tried so to drown myself in the pool, and I couldn’t. I went to Windsor — I ran away — did you know? I went to find him, as he might take care of me; and he was gone; and then I didn’t know what to do. I daredn’t go back home again — I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t have bore to look at anybody, for they’d have scorned me. I thought o’ you sometimes, and thought I’d come to you, for I didn’t think you’d be cross with me, and cry shame on me: I thought I could tell you. But then the other folks ’ud come to know it at last, and I couldn’t bear that. It was partly thinking o’ you made me come toward Stoniton; and, besides, I was so frightened at going wandering about till I was a beggar-woman, and had nothing; and sometimes it seemed as if I must go back to the Farm sooner than that. Oh, it was so dreadful, Dinah… I was so miserable… I wished I’d never been born into this world. I should never like to go into the green fields again — I hated ’em so in my misery.’

Hetty paused again, as if the sense of the past were too strong upon her for words.

‘And then I got to Stoniton, and I began to feel frightened that night, because I was so near home. And then the little baby was born, when I didn’t expect it; and the thought came into my mind that I might get rid of it, and go home again. The thought came all of a sudden, as I was lying in the bed, and it got stronger and stronger… I longed so to go back again… I couldn’t bear being so lonely, and coming to beg for want. And it gave me strength and resolution to get up and dress myself. I felt I must do it… I didn’t know how… I thought I’d find a pool, if I could, like that other, in the corner of the field, in the dark. And when the woman went out, I felt as if I was strong enough to do anything… I thought I should get rid of all my misery, and go back home, and never let ’em know why I ran away. I put on my bonnet and shawl, and went out into the dark street, with the baby under my cloak; and I walked fast till I got into a street a good way off, and there was a public, and I got some warm stuff to drink and some bread. And I walked on and on, and I hardly felt the ground I trod on; and it got lighter, for there came the moon — O Dinah, it frightened me when it first looked at me out o’ the clouds — it never looked so before; and I turned out of the road into the fields, for I was afraid o’ meeting anybody with the moon shining on me. And I came to a haystack, where I thought I could lie down and keep myself warm all night. There was a place cut into it, where I could make me a bed; and I lay comfortable, and the baby was warm against me; and I must have gone to sleep for a good while, for when I woke it was morning, but not very light, and the baby was crying. And I saw a wood a little way off… I thought there’d perhaps be a ditch or a pond there… and it was so early I thought I could hide the child there, and get a long way off before folks was up. And then I thought I’d go home — I’d get rides in carts and go home, and tell ’em I’d been to try and see for a place, and couldn’t get one. I longed so for it, Dinah, I longed so to be safe at home. I don’t know how I felt about the baby. I seemed to hate it — it was like a heavy weight hanging round my neck;[11] and yet its crying went through me, and I daredn’t look at its little hands and face. But I went on to the wood, and I walked about, but there was no water’…

Hetty shuddered. She was silent for some moments, and when she began again, it was in a whisper.

‘I came to a place where there was lots of chips and turf, and I sat down on the trunk of a tree to think what I should do. And all of a sudden I saw a hole under the nut-tree, like a little grave. And it darted into me like lightning — I’d lay the baby there, and cover it with the grass and the chips. I couldn’t kill it any other way. And I’d done it in a minute; and, oh, it cried so, Dinah — I *couldn’t* cover it quite up — I thought perhaps somebody ’ud come and take care of it, and then it wouldn’t die. And I made haste out of the wood, but I could hear it crying all the while; and when I got out into the fields, it was as if I was held fast — I couldn’t go away, for all I wanted so to go. And I sat against the haystack to watch if anybody ’ud come: I was very hungry, and I’d only a bit of bread left; but I couldn’t go away. And after ever such a while — hours and hours — the man came — him in a smock-frock, and he looked at me so, I was frightened, and I made haste and went on. I thought he was going to the wood, and would perhaps find the baby. And I went right on, till I came to a village, a long way off from the wood; and I was very sick, and faint, and hungry. I got something to eat there, and bought a loaf. But I was frightened to stay. I heard the

baby crying, and thought the other folks heard it too, — and I went on. But I was so tired, and it was getting towards dark. And at last, by the roadside there was a barn — ever such a way off any house — like the barn in Abbot's Close; and I thought I could go in there and hide myself among the hay and straw, and nobody 'ud be likely to come. I went in, and it was half full o' trusses of straw, and there was some hay, too. And I made myself a bed, ever so far behind, where nobody could find me; and I was so tired and weak, I went to sleep…. But oh, the baby's crying kept waking me; and I thought that man as looked at me so was come and laying hold of me. But I must have slept a long while at last, though I didn't know; for when I got up and went out of the barn, I didn't know whether it was night or morning. But it was morning, for it kept getting lighter; and I turned back the way I'd come. I couldn't help it, Dinah; it was the baby's crying made me go: and yet I was frightened to death. I thought that man in the smock-frock 'ud see me, and know I put the baby there. But I went on, for all that: I'd left off thinking about going home — it had gone out o' my mind. I saw nothing but that place in the wood where I'd buried the baby… I see it now. O Dinah! shall I allays see it?'

Hetty clung round Dinah, and shuddered again. The silence seemed long before she went on.

'I met nobody, for it was very early, and I got into the wood.… I knew the way to the place… the place against the nut-tree; and I could hear it crying at every stop.… I thought it was alive.… I don't know whether I was frightened or glad… I don't know what I felt. I only know I was in the wood, and heard the cry. I don't know what I felt till I saw the baby was gone. And when I'd put it there, I thought I should like somebody to find it, and save it from dying; but when I saw it was gone, I was struck like a stone, with fear. I never thought o' stirring, I felt so weak. I knew I couldn't run away, and everybody as saw me 'ud know about the baby. My heart went like a stone: I couldn't wish or try for anything; it seemed like as if I should stay there for ever, and nothing 'ud ever change. But they came and took me away.'

Hetty was silent, but she shuddered again, as if there were still something behind; and Dinah waited, for her heart was so full, that tears must come before words. At last Hetty burst out, with a sob –

'Dinah, do you think God will take away that crying and the place in the wood, now I've told everything?'

'Let us pray, poor sinner: let us fall on our knees again, and pray to the God of all mercy.'

CHAPTER XLVI

The Hours of Suspense

On Sunday morning, when the church bells in Stoniton were ringing for morning service, Bartle Massey re-entered Adam's room, after a short absence, and said –

'Adam, here's a visitor wants to see you.'

Adam was seated with his back towards the door, but he started up and turned round instantly, with a flushed face and an eager look. His face was even thinner and more worn than we have seen it before, but he was washed and shaven this Sunday morning.

'Is it any news?' he said.

'Keep yourself quiet, my lad,' said Bartle; 'keep quiet. It's not what you're thinking of: it's the young Methodist woman come from the prison. She's at the bottom o' the stairs, and wants to know if you think well to see her, for she has something to say to you about that poor castaway; but she wouldn't come in without your leave, she said. She thought you'd perhaps like to go out and speak to her. These preaching women are not so back'ard commonly,' Bartle muttered to himself.

'Ask her to come in,' said Adam.

He was standing with his face towards the door, and as Dinah entered, lifting up her mild grey eyes towards him, she saw at once the great change that had come since the day when she had looked up at the tall man in the cottage. There was a trembling in her clear voice as she put her hand into his, and said –

'Be comforted, Adam Bede: the Lord has not forsaken her.'

'Bless you for coming to her,' Adam said. 'Mr Massey brought me word yesterday as you was come.'

They could neither of them say any more just yet, but stood before each other in silence; and Bartle Massey, too, who had put on his spectacles, seemed transfixed, examining Dinah's face. But he recovered himself first, and said, 'Sit down, young woman, sit down', placing the chair for her, and retiring to his old seat on the bed.

'Thank you, friend; I won't sit down,' said Dinah, 'for I must hasten back: she entreated me not to stay long away. What I came for, Adam Bede, was to pray you to go and see the poor sinner, and bid her farewell. She desires to ask your forgiveness, and it is meet you should see her to-day, rather than in the early morning, when the time will be short.'

Adam stood trembling, and at last sank down on his chair again.

'It won't be,' he said; 'it'll be put off — there'll perhaps come a pardon. Mr Irwine said there was hope: he said, I needn't quite give it up.'

'That's a blessed thought to me,' said Dinah, her eyes filling with tears. 'It's a fearful thing hurrying her soul away so fast.'

'But let what will be,' she added, presently, 'you will surely come, and let her speak the words that are in her heart. Although her poor soul is very dark, and discerns little beyond the things of the flesh, she is no longer hard: she is contrite – she has confessed all to me. The pride of her heart has given way, and she leans on me for help, and desires to be taught. This fills me with trust; for I cannot but think that the brethren sometimes err in measuring the Divine love by the sinner's knowledge. She is going to write a letter to the friends at the Hall Farm for me to give them when she is gone; and when I told her you were here, she said, "I should like to say good-bye to Adam, and ask him to forgive me." You will come, Adam? — perhaps you will even now come back with me.'

'I can't,' Adam said: 'I can't say good-bye, while there's any hope. I'm listening, and listening — I can't think o' nothing but that. It can't be as she'll die that shameful death – 1 can't bring my mind to it.'

He got up from his chair again, and looked away out of the window, while Dinah stood with compassionate patience. In a minute or two he turned round and said –

'I *will* come, Dinah… to-morrow morning… if it must be. I may have more strength to bear it, if I know it *must* be. Tell her, I forgive her; tell her I will come — at the very last.'

'I will not urge you against the voice of your own heart,' said Dinah. 'I must hasten back to her, for it is wonderful how she clings now, and was not willing to let me out of her sight. She used never to make any

return to my affection before, but now tribulation has opened her heart. Farewell, Adam: our heavenly Father comfort you, and strengthen you to bear all things.' Dinah put out her hand, and Adam pressed it in silence.

Bartle Massey was getting up to lift the stiff latch of the door for her, but before he could reach it, she had said, gently, 'Farewell, friend', and was gone, with her light step, down the stairs.

'Well,' said Bartle, taking off his spectacles, and putting them into his pocket, 'if there must be women to make trouble in the world, it's but fair there should be women to be comforters under it; and she's one — she's one. It's a pity she's a Methodist; but there's no getting a woman without some foolishness or other.'

Adam never went to bed that night: the excitement of suspense, heightening with every hour that brought him nearer the fatal moment, was too great; and in spite of his entreaties, in spite of his promises that he would be perfectly quiet, the schoolmaster watched too.

'What does it matter to me, lad?' Bartle said: 'a night's sleep more or less? I shall sleep long enough, by-and-by, underground. Let me keep thee company in trouble while I can.'

It was a long and dreary night in that small chamber. Adam would sometimes get up, and tread backwards and forwards along the short space from wall to wall; then he would sit down and hide his face, and no sound would be heard but the ticking of the watch on the table, or the falling of a cinder from the fire which the schoolmaster carefully tended. Sometimes he would burst out into vehement speech –

'If I could ha' done anything to save her — if my bearing anything would ha' done any good… but t' have to sit still, and know it, and do nothing… it's hard for a man to bear… and to think o' what might ha' been now, if it hadn't been for *him*.… O God, it's the very day we should ha' been married.'

'Ay, my lad,' said Bartle, tenderly, 'it's heavy — it's heavy. But you must remember this: when you thought of marrying her, you'd a notion she'd got another sort of a nature inside her. You didn't think she could have got hardened in that little while to do what she's done.'

'I know — I know that,' said Adam. 'I thought she was loving and tender-hearted, and wouldn't tell a lie, or act deceitful. How could I think any other way? And if he'd never come near her, and I'd married her, and been loving to her, and took care of her, she might never ha' done anything bad. What would it ha' signified — my having a bit o' trouble with her? It 'ud ha' been nothing to this.'

'There's no knowing, my lad — there's no knowing what might have come. The smart's bad for you to bear now: you must have time — you must have time. But I've that opinion of you, that you'll rise above it all, and be a man again; and there may good come out of this that we don't see.'

'Good come out of it!' said Adam, passionately. 'That doesn't alter th' evil: *her* ruin can't be undone. I hate that talk o' people, as if there was a way o' making amends for everything. They'd more need be brought to see as the wrong they do can never be altered. When a man's spoiled his fellow-creatur's life, he's no right to comfort himself with thinking good may come out of it: somebody else's good doesn't alter her shame and misery.'

'Well, lad, well,' said Bartle, in a gentle tone, strangely in contrast with his usual peremptoriness and impatience of contradiction, 'it's likely enough I talk foolishness: I'm an old fellow, and it's a good many years since I was in trouble myself. It's easy finding reasons why other folks should be patient.'

'Mr Massey,' said Adam, penitently, 'I'm very hot and hasty. I owe you something different; but you mustn't take it ill of me.'

'Not I, lad — not I.'

So the night wore on in agitation, till the chill dawn and the growing light brought the tremulous quiet that comes on the brink of despair. There would soon be no more suspense.

'Let us go to the prison now, Mr Massey,' said Adam, when he saw the hand of his watch at six. 'If there's any news come, we shall hear about it.'

The people were astir already, moving rapidly, in one direction,[1] through the streets. Adam tried not to think where they were going, as they hurried past him in that short space between his lodging and the prison gates. He was thankful when the gates shut him in from seeing those eager people.

No; there was no news come — no pardon — no reprieve.

Adam lingered in the court half an hour before he could bring himself to send word to Dinah that he was come. But a voice caught his ear: he could not shut out the words.

'The cart is to set off at half-past seven.'

It must be said — the last good-bye: there was no help.

In ten minutes from that time, Adam was at the door of the cell. Dinah had sent him word that she could not come to him, she could not leave Hetty one moment; but Hetty was prepared for the meeting.

He could not see her when he entered, for agitation deadened his senses, and the dim cell was almost

dark to him. He stood a moment after the door closed behind him, trembling and stupefied.

But he began to see through the dimness — to see the dark eyes lifted up to him once more, but with no smile in them. O God, how sad they looked! The last time they had met his was when he parted from her with his heart full of joyous, hopeful love, and they looked out with a tearful smile from a pink, dimpled, childish face. The face was marble now; the sweet lips were pallid and half-open, and quivering; the dimples were all gone — all but one, that never went; and the eyes – Oh! the worst of all was the likeness they had to Hetty's. They were Hetty's eyes looking at him with that mournful gaze, as if she had come back to him from the dead to tell him of her misery.

She was clinging close to Dinah; her cheek was against Dinah's. It seemed as if her last faint strength and hope lay in that contact; and the pitying love that shone out from Dinah's face looked like a visible pledge of the Invisible Mercy.

When the sad eyes met — when Hetty and Adam looked at each other, she felt the change in *him* too, and it seemed to strike her with fresh fear. It was the first time she had seen any being whose face seemed to reflect the change in herself: Adam was a new image of the dreadful past and the dreadful present. She trembled more as she looked at him.

'Speak to him, Hetty,' Dinah said; 'tell him what is in your heart.'

Hetty obeyed her, like a little child.

'Adam… I'm very sorry… I behaved very wrong to you… will you forgive me… before I die?'

Adam answered with a half-sob: 'Yes, I forgive thee, Hetty: I forgave thee long ago.'

It had seemed to Adam as if his brain would burst with the anguish of meeting Hetty's eyes in the first moments; but the sound of her voice uttering these penitent words touched a chord which had been less strained: there was a sense of relief from what was becoming unbearable, and the rare tears came — they had never come before, since he had hung on Seth's neck in the beginning of his sorrow.

Hetty made an involuntary movement towards him; some of the love that she had once lived in the midst of was come near her again. She kept hold of Dinah's hand, but she went up to Adam and said, timidly –

'Will you kiss me again, Adam, for all I've been so wicked?'

Adam took the blanched wasted hand she put out to him, and they gave each other the solemn unspeakable kiss of a life-long parting.

'And tell him,' Hetty said, in rather a stronger voice, 'tell him… for there's nobody else to tell him… as I went after him and couldn't find him… and I hated him and cursed him once… but Dinah says, I should forgive him… and I try… for else God won't forgive me.'

There was a noise at the door of the cell now — the key was being turned in the lock, and when the door opened, Adam saw indistinctly that there were several faces there: he was too agitated to see more — even to see that Mr Irwine's face was one of them. He felt that the last preparations were beginning, and he could stay no longer. Room was silently made for him to depart, and he went to his chamber in loneliness, leaving Bartle Massey to watch and see the end.

CHAPTER XLVII

The Last Moment

It was a sight that some people remembered better even than their own sorrows — the sight in that grey clear morning, when the fatal cart with the two young women in it was descried by the waiting watching multitude, cleaving its way towards the hideous symbol of a deliberately-inflicted sudden death.

All Stoniton had heard of Dinah Morris, the young Methodist woman who had brought the obstinate criminal to confess, and there was as much eagerness to see her as to see the wretched Hetty.

But Dinah was hardly conscious of the multitude. When Hetty had caught sight of the vast crowd in the distance, she had clutched Dinah convulsively.

'Close your eyes, Hetty,' Dinah said, 'and let us pray without ceasing to God.'[1]

And in a low voice, as the cart went slowly along through the midst of the gazing crowd, she poured forth her soul with the wrestling intensity of a last pleading, for the trembling creature that clung to her and clutched her as the only visible sign of love and pity.

Dinah did not know that the crowd was silent, gazing at her with a sort of awe — she did not even know how near they were to the fatal spot, when the cart stopped, and she shrank appalled at a loud shout hideous to her ear, like a vast yell of demons. Hetty's shriek mingled with the sound, and they clasped each other in mutual horror.

But it was not a shout of execration — not a yell of exultant cruelty.

It was a shout of sudden excitement at the appearance of a horseman cleaving the crowd at full gallop. The horse is hot and distressed, but answers to the desperate spurring; the rider looks as if his eyes were glazed by madness, and he saw nothing but what was unseen by others. See, he has something in his hand — he is holding it up as if it were a signal.

The Sheriff[2] knows him: it is Arthur Donnithorne, carrying in his hand a hard-won release from death.

CHAPTER XLVIII

Another Meeting in the Wood

The next day, at evening, two men were walking from opposite points towards the same scene, drawn thither by a common memory. The scene was the Grove by Donnithorne Chase: you know who the men were.

The old Squire's funeral had taken place that morning, the will had been read, and now in the first breathing-space, Arthur Donnithorne had come out for a lonely walk, that he might look fixedly at the new future before him, and confirm himself in a sad resolution. He thought he could do that best in the Grove

Adam, too, had come from Stoniton on Monday evening, and to-day he had not left home, except to go to the family at the Hall Farm, and tell them everything that Mr Irwine had left untold. He had agreed with the Poysers that he would follow them to their new neighbourhood, wherever that might be; for he meant to give up the management of the woods, and, as soon as it was practicable, he would wind up his business with Jonathan Bürge, and settle with his mother and Seth in a home within reach of the friends to whom he felt bound by a mutual sorrow.

'Seth and me are sure to find work,' he said. 'A man that's got our trade at his finger ends is at home everywhere; and we must make a new start. My mother won't stand in the way, for she's told me, since I came home, she'd made up her mind to being buried in another parish, if I wished it, and if I'd be more comfortable elsewhere. It's wonderful how quiet she's been ever since I came back. It seems as if the very greatness o' the trouble had quieted and calmed her. We shall all be better in a new country; though there's some I shall be loth to leave behind. But I won't part from you and yours, if I can help it, Mr Poyser, Trouble's made us kin.'

'Ay, lad,' said Martin. 'We'll go out o' hearing o' that man's name. But I doubt we shall Ne'er go far enough for folks not to find out as we've got them belonging to us as are transported o'er the seas,[1] and were like to be hanged. We shall have that flyin' up in our faces, and our children's after us.'

That was a long visit to the Hall Farm, and drew too strongly on Adam's energies for him to think of seeing others, or re-entering on his old occupations till the morrow. 'But tomorrow,' he said to himself, 'I'll go to work again. I shall learn to like it again some time, maybe; and it's right, whether I like it or not.'

This evening was the last he would allow to be absorbed by sorrow: suspense was gone now, and he must bear the unalterable. He was resolved not to see Arthur Donnithorne again, if it were possible to avoid him. He had no message to deliver from Hetty now, for Hetty had seen Arthur; and Adam distrusted himself: he had learned to dread the violence of his own feeling. That word of Mr Irwine's — that he must remember what he had felt after giving the last blow to Arthur in the Grove — had remained with him.

These thoughts about Arthur, like all thoughts that are charged with strong feeling, were continually recurring, and they always called up the image of the Grove — of that spot under the overarching boughs where he had caught sight of the two bending figures, and had been possessed by sudden rage.

'I'll go and see it again to-night for the last time,' he said; 'it'll do me good; it'll make me feel over again what I felt when I'd knocked him down. I felt what poor empty work it was, as soon as I'd done it, *before* I began to think he might be dead.'

In this way it happened that Arthur and Adam were walking towards the same spot at the same time.

Adam had on his working-dress again, now, — for he had thrown off the other with a sense of relief as soon as he came home; and if he had had the basket of tools over his shoulder, he might have been taken, with his pale wasted face, for the spectre of the Adam Bede who entered the Grove on that August evening eight months ago. But he had no basket of tools, and he was not walking with the old erectness, looking keenly round him; his hands were thrust in his side pockets, and his eyes rested chiefly on the ground. He had not long entered the Grove, and now he paused before a beech. He knew that tree well; it was the boundary mark of his youth — the sign, to him, of the time when some of his earliest, strongest feelings had left him. He felt sure they would never return. And yet, at this moment, there was a stirring of affection at the remembrance of that Arthur Donnithorne whom he had believed in before he had come up to this beech eight months ago. It was affection for the dead: *that* Arthur existed no longer.

He was disturbed by the sound of approaching footsteps, but the beech stood at a turning in the road, and

he could not see who was coming, until the tall slim figure in deep mourning suddenly stood before him at only two yards' distance. They both started, and looked at each other in silence. Often, in the last fortnight, Adam had imagined himself as close to Arthur as this, assailing him with words that should be as harrowing as the voice of remorse, forcing upon him a just share in the misery he had caused; and often, too, he had told himself that such a meeting had better not be. But in imagining the meeting he had always seen Arthur, as he had met him on that evening in the Grove, florid, careless, light of speech; and the figure before him touched him with the signs of suffering. Adam knew what suffering was — he could not lay a cruel finger on a bruised man. He felt no impulse that he needed to resist: silence was more just than reproach. Arthur was the first to speak.

'Adam,' he said, quietly, 'it may be a good thing that we have met here, for I wished to see you. I should have asked to see you to-morrow.'

He paused, but Adam said nothing.

'I know it is painful to you to meet me,' Arthur went on, 'but it is not likely to happen again for years to come.'

'No, sir,' said Adam, coldly, 'that was what I meant to write to you to-morrow, as it would be better all dealings should be at an end between us, and somebody else put in my place.'

Arthur felt the answer keenly, and it was not without an effort that he spoke again.

'It was partly on that subject I wished to speak to you. I don't want to lessen your indignation against me, or ask you to do anything for my sake. I only wish to ask you if you will help me to lessen the evil consequences of the past, which is unchangeable. I don't mean consequences to myself, but to others. It is but little I can do, I know. I know the worst consequences will remain; but something may be done, and you can help me. Will you listen to me patiently?'

'Yes, sir,' said Adam, after some hesitation; 'I'll hear what it is. If I can help to mend anything, I will. Anger 'ull mend nothing, I know. We've had enough o' that.'

'I was going to the Hermitage,' said Arthur. 'Will you go there with me and sit down? We can talk better there.'

The Hermitage had never been entered since they left it together, for Arthur had locked up the key in his desk. And now, when he opened the door, there was the candle burnt out in the socket; there was the chair in the same place where Adam remembered sitting; there was the waste-paper basket full of scraps, and deep down in it, Arthur felt in an instant, there was the little pink silk handkerchief. It would have been painful to enter this place if their previous thoughts had been less painful.

They sat down opposite each other in the old places, and Arthur said, 'I'm going away, Adam; I'm going into the army.'

Poor Arthur felt that Adam ought to be affected by this announcement — ought to have a movement of sympathy towards him. But Adam's lips remained firmly closed, and the expression of his face unchanged.

'What I want to say to you,' Arthur continued, 'is this: one of my reasons for going away is, that no one else may leave Hayslope — may leave their home on my account. I would do anything, there is no sacrifice I would not make, to prevent any further injury to others through my — through what has happened.'

Arthur's words had precisely the opposite effect to that he had anticipated. Adam thought he perceived in them that notion of compensation for irretrievable wrong, that self-soothing attempt to make evil bear the same fruits as good, which most of all roused his indignation. He was as strongly impelled to look painful facts right in the face as Arthur was to turn away his eyes from them. Moreover, he had the wakeful suspicious pride of a poor man in the presence of a rich man. He felt his old severity returning as he said –

'The time's past for that, sir. A man should make sacrifices to keep clear of doing a wrong; sacrifices won't undo it when it's done. When people's feelings have got a deadly wound, they can't be cured with favours.'

'Favours!' said Arthur, passionately; 'no; how can you suppose I meant that? But the Poysers — Mr Irwine tells me the Poysers mean to leave the place where they have lived so many years — for generations. Don't you see, as Mr Irwine does, that if they could be persuaded to overcome the feeling that drives them away, it would be much better for them in the end to remain on the old spot, among the friends and neighbours who know them?'

'That's true,' said Adam, coldly. 'But then, sir, folks's feelings are not so easily overcome. It'll be hard for Martin Poyser to go to a strange place, among strange faces, when he's been bred up on the Hall Farm, and his father before him; but then it 'ud be harder for a man with his feelings to stay. I don't see how the thing's to be made any other than hard. There's a sort o' damage, sir, that can't be made up for.'

Arthur was silent some moments. In spite of other feelings, dominant in him this evening, his pride winced under Adam's mode of treating him. Wasn't he himself suffering? Was not he too obliged to

renounce his most cherished hopes? It was now as it had been eight months ago — Adam was forcing Arthur to feel more intensely the irrevocableness of his own wrongdoing: he was presenting the sort of resistance that was the most irritating to Arthur's eager, ardent nature. But his anger was subdued by the same influence that had subdued Adam's when they first confronted each other — by the marks of suffering in a long familiar face. The momentary struggle ended in the feeling that he could bear a great deal from Adam, to whom he had been the occasion of bearing so much; but there was a touch of pleading, boyish vexation in his tone as he said –

'But people may make injuries worse by unreasonable conduct — by giving way to anger and satisfying that for the moment, instead of thinking what will be the effect in the future.

'If I were going to stay here and act as landlord,' he added, presently, with still more eagerness — 'if I were careless about what I've done — what I've been the cause of, you would have some excuse, Adam, for going away and encouraging others to go. You would have some excuse then for trying to make the evil worse. But when I tell you I'm going away for years — when you know what that means for me, how it cuts off every plan of happiness I've ever formed — it is impossible for a sensible man like you to believe that there is any real ground for the Poysers refusing to remain. I know their feeling about disgrace, — Mr Irwine has told me all; but he is of opinion that they might be persuaded out of this idea that they are disgraced in the eyes of their neighbours, and that they can't remain on my estate, if you would join him in his efforts, — if you would stay yourself, and go on managing the old woods.'

Arthur paused a moment, and then added, pleadingly, 'You know that's a good work to do for the sake of other people, besides the owner. And you don't know but that they may have a better owner soon, whom you will like to work for. If I die, my cousin Tradgett will have the estate, and take my name.[2] He is a good fellow.'

Adam could not help being moved: it was impossible for him not to feel that this was the voice of the honest, warm-hearted Arthur whom he had loved and been proud of in old days; but nearer memories would not be thrust away. He was silent; yet Arthur saw an answer in his face that induced him to go on, with growing earnestness.

'And then, if you would talk to the Poysers — if you would talk the matter over with Mr Irwine — he means to see you tomorrow — and then if you would join your arguments to his to prevail on them not to go.… I know, of course, that they would not accept any favour from me: I mean nothing of that kind: but I'm sure they would suffer less in the end. Irwine thinks so too; and Mr Irwine is to have the chief authority on the estate — he has consented to undertake that. They will really be under no man but one whom they respect and like. It would be the same with you, Adam; and it could be nothing but a desire to give me worse pain that could incline you to go.'

Arthur was silent again for a little while, and then said, with some agitation in his voice –

'I wouldn't act so towards you, I know. If you were in my place and I in yours, I should try to help you to do the best.'

Adam made a hasty movement on his chair, and looked on the ground. Arthur went on –

'Perhaps you've never done anything you've had bitterly to repent of in your life, Adam; if you had, you would be more generous. You would know then that it's worse for me than for you.'

Arthur rose from his seat with the last words, and went to one of the windows, looking out and turning his back on Adam, as he continued, passionately –

'Haven't *I* loved her too? Didn't I see her yesterday? Shan't I carry the thought of her about with me as much as you will? And don't you think you would suffer more if you'd been in fault?'

There was silence for several minutes, for the struggle in Adam's mind was not easily decided. Facile natures, whose emotions have little permanence, can hardly understand how much inward resistance he overcame before he rose from his seat and turned towards Arthur. Arthur heard the movement, and, turning round, met the sad but softened look with which Adam said –

'It's true what you say, sir: I'm hard — it's in my nature. I was too hard with my father, for doing wrong. I've been a bit hard t' everybody but *her*. I felt as if nobody pitied her enough — her suffering cut into me so; and when I thought the folks at the Farm were too hard with her, I said I'd never be hard to anybody myself again. But feeling overmuch about her has perhaps made me unfair to you. I've known what it is in my life to repent and feel it's too late: I felt I'd been too harsh to my father when he was gone from me — I feel it now, when I think of him. I've no right to be hard towards them as have done wrong and repent.'

Adam spoke these words with the firm distinctness of a man who is resolved to leave nothing unsaid that he is bound to say; but he went on with more hesitation.

'I wouldn't shake hands with you once, sir, when you asked me — but if you're willing to do it now, for all I refused then'…

Arthur's white hand was in Adam's large grasp in an instant, and with that action there was a strong rush, on both sides, of the old, boyish affection.

'Adam,' Arthur said, impelled to full confession now, 'it would never have happened if I'd known you loved her. That would have helped to save me from it. And I *did* struggle: I never meant to injure her. I deceived you afterwards — and that led on to worse; but I thought it was forced upon me, I thought it was the best thing I could do. And in that letter I told her to let me know if she were in any trouble: don't think I would not have done everything I could. But I was all wrong from the very first, and horrible wrong has come of it. God knows, I'd give my life if I could undo it.'

They sat down again opposite each other, and Adam said, tremulously –

'How did she seem when you left her, sir?'

'Don't ask me, Adam,' Arthur said; 'I feel sometimes as if I should go mad with thinking of her looks and what she said to me, and then, that I couldn't get a full pardon — that I couldn't save her from that wretched fate of being transported — that I can do nothing for her all those years; and she may die under it, and never know comfort any more.'

'Ah, sir,' said Adam, for the first time feeling his own pain merged in sympathy for Arthur, 'you and me'll often be thinking o' the same thing, when we're a long way off one another. I'll pray God to help you, as I pray him to help me.'

'But there's that sweet woman — that Dinah Morris,' Arthur said, pursuing his own thoughts, and not knowing what had been the sense of Adam's words, 'she says she shall stay with her to the very last moment — till she goes; and the poor thing clings to her as if she found some comfort in her. I could worship that woman; I don't know what I should do if she were not there. Adam, you will see her when she comes back: I could say nothing to her yesterday — nothing of what I felt towards her. Tell her,' Arthur went on hurriedly, as if he wanted to hide the emotion with which he spoke, while he took off his chain and watch — 'tell her I asked you to give her this in remembrance of me — of the man to whom she is the one source of comfort, when he thinks of… I know she doesn't care about such things — or anything else I can give her for its own sake. But she will use the watch — I shall like to think of her using it.'

'I'll give it to her, sir,' Adam said, 'and tell her your words. She told me she should come back to the people at the Hall Farm.'

'And you *will* persuade the Poysers to stay, Adam?' said Arthur, reminded of the subject which both of them had forgotten in the first interchange of revived friendship. 'You *will* stay yourself, and help Mr Irwine to carry out the repairs and improvements on the estate?'

'There's one thing, sir, that perhaps you don't take account of,' said Adam, with hesitating gentleness, 'and that was what made me hang back longer. You see, it's the same with both me and the Poysers: if we stay, it's for our own worldly interest, and it looks as if we'd put up with anything for the sake o' that. I know that's what they'll feel, and I can't help feeling a little of it myself. When folks have got an honourable, independent spirit, they don't like to do anything that might make 'em seem base-minded.'

'But no one who knows you will think that, Adam: that is not a reason strong enough against a course that is really more generous, more unselfish than the other. And it will be known — it shall be made known, that both you and the Poysers stayed at my entreaty. Adam, don't try to make things worse for me; I'm punished enough without that.'

'No, sir, no,' Adam said, looking at Arthur with mournful affection. 'God forbid I should make things worse for you. I used to wish I could do it, in my passion; — but that was when I thought you didn't feel enough. I'll stay, sir: I'll do the best I can. It's all I've got to think of now — to do my work well, and make the world a bit better place for them as can enjoy it.'

'Then we'll part now, Adam. You will see Mr Irwine tomorrow, and consult with him about everything.'

'Are you going soon, sir?' said Adam.

'As soon as possible — after I've made the necessary arrangements. Good-bye, Adam. I shall think of you going about the old place.'

'Good-bye, sir. God bless you.'

The hands were clasped once more, and Adam left the Hermitage, feeling that sorrow was more bearable now hatred was gone.

As soon as the door was closed behind him, Arthur went to the waste-paper basket and took out the little pink silk handkerchief.

BOOK SIXTH

CHAPTER XLIX

At the Hall Farm

The first autumnal afternoon sunshine of 1801 — more than eighteen months after that parting of Adam and Arthur in the Hermitage — was on the yard at the Hall Farm, and the bull-dog was in one of his most excited moments; for it was that hour of the day when the cows were being driven into the yard for their afternoon milking. No wonder the patient beasts ran confusedly into the wrong places, for the alarming din of the bull-dog was mingled with more distant sounds which the timid feminine creatures, with pardonable superstition, imagined also to have some relation to their own movements — with the tremendous crack of the waggoner's whip, the roar of his voice, and the booming thunder of the waggon, as it left the rick-yard empty of its golden load.

The milking of the cows was a sight Mrs Poyser loved, and at this hour on mild days she was usually standing at the house door, with her knitting in her hands, in quiet contemplation, only heightened to a keener interest when the vicious yellow cow, who had once kicked over a pailful of precious milk, was about to undergo the preventive punishment of having her hinder-legs strapped.

To-day, however, Mrs Poyser gave but a divided attention to the arrival of the cows, for she was in eager discussion with Dinah, who was stitching Mr Poyser's shirt-collars, and had borne patiently to have her thread broken three times by Totty pulling at her arm with a sudden insistance that she should look at 'Baby', that is, at a large wooden doll with no legs and a long skirt, whose bald head Totty, seated in her small chair at Dinah's side, was caressing and pressing to her fat cheek with much fervour. Totty is larger by more than two years' growth than when you first saw her, and she has on a black frock under her pinafore: Mrs Poyser too has on a black gown, which seems to heighten the family likeness between her and Dinah. In other respects there is little outward change now discernible in our old friends, or in the pleasant house-place, bright with polished oak and pewter.

'I never saw the like to you, Dinah,' Mrs Poyser was saying, 'when you've once took anything into your head: there's no more moving you than the rooted tree. You may say what you like, but I don't believe *that's* religion; for what's the Sermon on the Mount[1] about, as you're so fond o' reading to the boys, but doing what other folks 'ud have you do? But if it was anything unreasonable they wanted you to do, like taking your cloak off and giving it to 'em, or letting 'em slap you i' the face, I daresay you'd be ready enough: it's only when one 'ud have you do what's plain common-sense and good for yourself, as you're obstinate th' other way.'

'Nay, dear aunt,' said Dinah, smiling slightly as she went on with her work. 'I'm sure your wish 'ud be a reason for me to do anything that I didn't feel it was wrong to do.'

'Wrong! You drive me past bearing. What is there wrong, I should like to know, i' staying along wi' your own friends, as are th' happier for having you with 'em, an' are willing to provide for you, even if your work didn't more nor pay 'em for the bit o' sparrow's victual y' eat, and the bit o' rag you put on? An' who is it, I should like to know, as you're bound t' help and comfort i' the world more nor your own flesh and blood — an' me th' only aunt you've got above-ground, an' am brought to the brink o' the grave welly every winter as comes, an' there's the child as sits beside you 'ull break her little heart when you go, an' the grandfather not been dead a twelvemonth, an' your uncle 'ull miss you so as never was — a-lighting his pipe an' waiting on him, an' now I can trust you wi' the butter, an' have had all the trouble o' teaching you, and there's all the sewing to be done, an' I must have a strange gell out o' Treddles'on to do it — an' all because you must go back to that bare heap o' stones as the very crows fly over an' won't stop at.'

'Dear aunt Rachel,' said Dinah, looking up in Mrs Poyser's face, 'it's your kindness makes you say I'm useful to you. You don't really want me now; for Nancy and Molly are clever at their work, and you're in good health now, by the blessing of God, and my uncle is of a cheerful countenance again, and you have

neighbours and friends not a few — some of them come to sit with my uncle almost daily. Indeed, you will not miss me; and at Snowfield there are brethren and sisters in great need, who have none of those comforts you have around you. I feel that I am called back to those amongst whom my lot was first cast: I feel drawn again towards the hills where I used to be blessed in carrying the word of life to the sinful and desolate.'

'You feel! yes,' said Mrs Poyser, returning from a parenthetic glance at the cows. 'That's allays the reason I'm to sit down wi', when you've a mind to do anything contrairy. What do you want to be preaching for more than you're preaching now? Don't you go off, the Lord knows where, every Sunday a-preaching and praying? an' haven't you got Methodists enow at Treddles'on to go and look at, if church folks's faces are too handsome to please you? an' isn't there them i' this parish as you've got under hand, and they're like enough to make friends wi' Old Harry again as soon as your back's turned? There's that Bessy Cranage — she'll be flaunting i' new finery three weeks after you're gone, I'll be bound: she'll no more go on in her new ways without you, than a dog 'ull stand on its hindlegs when there's nobody looking. But I suppose it doesna matter so much about folks's souls i' this country, else you'd be for staying with your own aunt, for she's none so good but what you might help her to be better.'

There was a certain something in Mrs Poyser's voice just then, which she did not wish to be noticed, so she turned round hastily to look at the clock and said: 'See there! It's tea-time; an' if Martin's i' the rick-yard, he'll like a cup. Here, Totty, my chicken, let mother put your bonnet on, and then you go out into the rick-yard, and see if father's there, and tell him he mustn't go away again without coming t' have a cup o' tea; and tell your brothers to come in too.'

Totty trotted off in her flapping bonnet, while Mrs Poyser set out the bright oak table, and reached down the tea-cups.

'You talk o' them gells Nancy and Molly being clever i' their work,' she began again; — 'it's fine talking. They're all the same, clever or stupid — one can't trust 'em out o' one's sight a minute. They want somebody's eye on 'em constant if they're to be kept to their work. An' suppose I'm ill again this winter, as I was the winter before last, who's to look after 'em then, if you're gone? An' there's that blessed child — something's sure t' happen to her — they'll let her tumble into the fire, or get at the kettle wi' the boiling lard in't, or some mischief as 'ull lame her for life; an' it'll be all your fault, Dinah.'

'Aunt,' said Dinah, 'I promise to come back to you in the winter if you're ill. Don't think I will ever stay away from you if you're in real want of me. But indeed it is needful for my own soul that I should go away from this life of ease and luxury, in which I have all things too richly to enjoy — at least that I should go away for a short space. No one can know but myself what are my inward needs, and the besetments I am most in danger from. Your wish for me to stay is not a call of duty which I refuse to hearken to because it is against my own desires; it is a temptation that I must resist, lest the love of the creature should become like a mist in my soul shutting out the heavenly light.'

'It passes my cunning to know what you mean by ease and luxury,' said Mrs Poyser, as she cut the bread and butter. 'It's true there's good victual enough about you, as nobody shall ever say I don't provide enough and to spare, but if there's ever a bit o' odds and ends as nobody else 'ud eat, you're sure to pick it out… but look there! there's Adam Bede a-carrying the little un in. I wonder how it is he's come so early.'

Mrs Poyser hastened to the door for the pleasure of looking at her darling in a new position, with love in her eyes but reproof on her tongue.

'Oh for shame, Totty! Little gells o' five year old should be ashamed to be carried. Why, Adam, she'll break your arm, such a big gell as that; set her down — for shame!'

'Nay, nay,' said Adam, 'I can lift her with my hand, I've no need to take my arm to it.'

Totty, looking as serenely unconscious of remark as a fat white puppy, was set down at the door-place, and the mother enforced her reproof with a shower of kisses.

'You're surprised to see me at this hour o' the day,' said Adam.

'Yes, but come in,' said Mrs Poyser, making way for him; 'there's no bad news, I hope?'

'No, nothing bad,' Adam answered, as he went up to Dinah and put out his hand to her. She had laid down her work and stood up, instinctively, as he approached her. A faint blush died away from her pale cheek as she put her hand in his, and looked up at him timidly.

'It's an errand to you brought me, Dinah,' said Adam, apparently unconscious that he was holding her hand all the while; 'mother's a bit ailing, and she's set her heart on your coming to stay the night with her, if you'll be so kind. I told her I'd call and ask you as I came from the village. She overworks herself, and I can't persuade her to have a little girl t' help her. I don't know what's to be done.'

Adam released Dinah's hand as he ceased speaking, and was expecting an answer; but before she had opened her lips Mrs Poyser said –

'Look there now! I told you there was folks enow t' help i' this parish, wi'out going further off. There's

Mrs Bede getting as old and cas'alty[2] as can be, and she won't let anybody but you go a-nigh her hardly. The folks at Snowfield have learnt by this time to do better wi'out you nor she can.'

'I'll put my bonnet on and set off directly, if you don't want anything done first, aunt,' said Dinah, folding up her work.

'Yes, I do want something done. I want you t' have your tea, child; it's all ready; and you'll have a cup, Adam, if y' arena in too big a hurry.'

'Yes, I'll have a cup, please; and then I'll walk with Dinah. I'm going straight home, for I've got a lot o' timber valuations to write out.'

'Why, Adam lad, are you here?' said Mr Poyser, entering warm and coatless, with the two black-eyed boys behind him, still looking as much like him as two small elephants are like a large one. 'How is it we've got sight o' you so long before f oddering-time? '

'I came on an errand for mother,' said Adam. 'She's got a touch of her old complaint, and she wants Dinah to go and stay with her a bit.'

'Well, we'll spare her for your mother a little while,' said Mr Poyser. 'But we wonna spare her for anybody else, On'y her husband.'

'Husband!' said Marty, who was at the most prosaic and literal period of the boyish mind. 'Why, Dinah hasn't got a husband.'

'Spare her?' said Mrs Poyser, placing a seed-cake on the table, and then seating herself to pour out the tea. 'But we must spare her, it seems, and not for a husband neither, but for her own megrims. Tommy, what are you doing to your little sister's doll? making the child naughty, when she'd be good if you'd let her. You shanna have a morsel o' cake if you behave so.'

Tommy, with true brotherly sympathy, was amusing himself by turning Dolly's skirt over her bald head, and exhibiting her truncated body to the general scorn — an indignity which cut Totty to the heart.

'What do you think Dinah's been a-telling me since dinnertime?' Mrs Poyser continued, looking at her husband.

'Eh! I'm a poor un at guessing,' said Mr Poyser.

'Why, she means to go back to Snowfield again, and work i' the mill, and starve herself, as she used to do, like a creatur as has got no friends.'

Mr Poyser did not readily find words to express his unpleasant astonishment; he only looked from his wife to Dinah, who had now seated herself beside Totty, as a bulwark against brotherly playfulness, and was busying herself with the children's tea. If he had been given to making general reflections, it would have occurred to him that there was certainly a change come over Dinah, for she never used to change colour; but, as it was, he merely observed that her face was flushed at that moment. Mr Poyser thought she looked the prettier for it: it was a flush no deeper than the petal of a monthly rose.[3] Perhaps it came because her uncle was looking at her so fixedly; but there is no knowing; for just then Adam was saying, with quiet surprise –

'Why, I hoped Dinah was settled among us for life. I thought she'd given up the notion o' going back to her old country.'

'Thought! yes,' said Mrs Poyser; 'and so would anybody else ha' thought, as had got their right end up'ards. But I suppose you must *be* a Methodist to know what a Methodist 'ull do. It's ill guessing what the bats are flying after.'

'Why, what have we done to you, Dinah, as you must go away from us?' said Mr Poyser, still pausing over his tea-cup. 'It's like breaking your word, welly; for your aunt never had no thought but you'd make this your home.'

'Nay, uncle,' said Dinah, trying to be quite calm. 'When I first came, I said it was only for a time, as long as I could be of any comfort to my aunt.'

'Well, an' who said you'd ever left off being a comfort to me?' said Mrs Poyser. 'If you didna mean to stay wi' me, you'd better never ha' come. Them as ha' never had a cushion don't miss it.'

'Nay, nay,' said Mr Poyser, who objected to exaggerated views. 'Thee mustna say so; we should ha' been ill off wi'out her, Lady Day was a twelvemont': we mun be thankful for that, whether she stays or no. But I canna think what she mun leave a good home for, to go back int' a country where the land, most on't, isna worth ten shillings an acre, rent and profits.'

'Why, that's just the reason she wants to go, as fur as she can give a reason,' said Mrs Poyser. 'She says this country's too comfortable, an' there's too much t' eat, an' folks arena miserable enough. And she's going next week: I canna turn her, say what I will. It's allays the way wi' them meekfaced people; you may's well pelt a bag o' feathers as talk to 'em. But *I* say it isna religion, to be so obstinate — is it now, Adam?'

Adam saw that Dinah was more disturbed than he had ever seen her by any matter relating to herself,

and, anxious to relieve her, if possible, he said, looking at her affectionately –

'Nay, I can't find fault with anything Dinah does. I believe her thoughts are better than our guesses, let 'em be what they may. I should ha' been thankful for her to stay among us; but if she thinks well to go, I wouldn't cross her, or make it hard to her by objecting. We owe her something different to that.'

As it often happens, the words intended to relieve her were just too much for Dinah's susceptible feelings at this moment. The tears came into the grey eyes too fast to be hidden; and she got up hurriedly, meaning it to be understood that she was going to put on her bonnet.

'Mother, what's Dinah crying for?' said Totty. 'She isn't a naughty dell.'

'Thee'st gone a bit too fur,' said Mr Poyser. 'We've no right t' interfere with her doing as she likes. An' thee'dst be as angry as could be wi' me, if I said a word against anything she did.'

'Because you'd very like be finding fault wi'out reason,' said Mrs Poyser. 'But there's reason i' what I say, else I shouldna say it. It's easy talking for them as can't love her so well as her own aunt does. An' me got so used to her! I shall feel as uneasy as a new sheared sheep when she's gone from me. An' to think of her leaving a parish where she's so looked on. There's Mr Irwine makes as much of her as if she was a lady, for all her being a Methodist, an' wi' that maggot o' preaching in her head; — God forgi'e me if I'm i' the wrong to call it so.'

'Ay,' said Mr Poyser, looking jocose; 'but thee dostna tell Adam what he said to thee about it one day. The missis was saying, Adam, as the preaching was th' only fault to be found wi' Dinah, and Mr Irwine says, "But you mustn't find fault with her for that, Mrs Poyser; you forget she's got no husband to preach to. I'll answer for it, you give Poyser many a good sermon." The parson had thee there,' Mr Poyser added, laughing unctuously. 'I told Bartle Massey on it, an' he laughed too.'

'Yes, it's a small joke sets men laughing when they sit a-staring at one another with a pipe i' their mouths,' said Mrs Poyser. 'Give Bartle Massey his way, and he'd have all the sharpness to himself. If the chaff-cutter[4] had the making of us, we should all be straw, I reckon. Totty, my chicken, go up-stairs to cousin Dinah, and see what she's doing, and give her a pretty kiss.'

This errand was devised for Totty as a means of checking certain threatening symptoms about the corners of the mouth; for Tommy, no longer expectant of cake, was lifting up his eyelids with his fore-fingers, and turning his eyeballs towards Totty, in a way that she felt to be disagreeably personal.

'You're rare and busy now — eh, Adam?' said Mr Poyser. 'Burge's getting so bad wi' his asthmy,[5] it's well if he'll ever do much riding about again.'

'Yes, we've got a pretty bit o' building on hand now,' said Adam: 'what with the repairs on th' estate, and the new houses at Treddles'on.'

'I'll bet a penny that new house Bürge is building on his own bit o' land is for him and Mary to go to,' said Mr Poyser. 'He'll be for laying by business soon, I'll warrant, and be wanting you to take to it all, and pay him so much by th' 'ear. We shall see you living on th' hill before another twelvemont's over.'

'Well,' said Adam, 'I should like t' have the business in my own hands. It isn't as I mind much about getting any more money: we've enough and to spare now, with only our two selves and mother; but I should like t' have my own way about things: I could try plans then, as I can't do now.'

'You get on pretty well wi' the new steward, I reckon?' said Mr Poyser.

'Yes, yes; he's a sensible man enough: understands farming – he's carrying on the draining, and all that, capital. You must go some day towards the Stonyshire side, and see what alterations they're making. But he's got no notion about buildings: you can so seldom get hold of a man as can turn his brains to more nor one thing; it's just as if they wore blinkers like th' horses, and could see nothing o' one side of 'em. Now, there's Mr Irwine has got notions o' building more nor most architects; for as for th' architects, they set up to be fine fellows, but the most of 'em don't know where to set a chimney so as it shan't be quarrelling with a door. My notion is, a practical builder, that's got a bit o' taste, makes the best architect for common things; and I've ten times the pleasure i' seeing after the work when I've made the plan myself.'

Mr Poyser listened with an admiring interest to Adam's discourse on building; but perhaps it suggested to him that the building of his corn-rick had been proceeding a little too long without the control of the master's eye; for when Adam had done speaking, he got up and said –

'Well, lad, I'll bid you good-bye now, for I'm off to the rick-yard again.'

Adam rose too, for he saw Dinah entering, with her bonnet on, and a little basket in her hand, preceded by Totty.

'You're ready, I see, Dinah,' Adam said; 'so we'll set off, for the sooner I'm at home the better.'

'Mother,' said Totty, with her treble pipe, 'Dinah was saying her prayers and crying ever so.'

'Hush, hush,' said the mother: 'little gells mustn't chatter.'

Whereupon the father, shaking with silent laughter, set Totty on the white deal table, and desired her to

kiss him. Mr and Mrs Poyser, you perceive, had no correct principles of education.

'Come back to-morrow if Mrs Bede doesn't want you, Dinah,' said Mrs Poyser: 'but you can stay, you know, if she's ill.'

So, when the good-byes had been said, Dinah and Adam left the Hall Farm together.

CHAPTER L

In the Cottage

Adam did not ask Dinah to take his arm when they got out into the lane. He had never yet done so, often as they had walked together; for he had observed that she never walked arm-in-arm with Seth, and he thought, perhaps, that kind of support was not agreeable to her. So they walked apart, though side by side, and the close poke of her little black bonnet[1] hid her face from him.

'You can't be happy, then, to make the Hall Farm your home, Dinah?' Adam said, with the quiet interest of a brother, who has no anxiety for himself in the matter. 'It's a pity, seeing they're so fond of you.'

'You know, Adam, my heart is as their heart, so far as love for them and care for their welfare goes; but they are in no present need, their sorrows are healed, and I feel that I am called back to my old work, in which I found a blessing that I have missed of late in the midst of too abundant worldly good. I know it is a vain thought to flee from the work that God appoints us, for the sake of finding a greater blessing to our own souls, as if we could choose for ourselves where we shall find the fulness of the Divine Presence, instead of seeking it where alone it is to be found, in loving obedience. But now, I believe, I have a clear showing that my work lies elsewhere – at least for a time. In the years to come, if my aunt's health should fail, or she should otherwise need me, I shall return.'

'You know best, Dinah,' said Adam. 'I don't believe you'd go against the wishes of them that love you, and are akin to you, without a good and sufficient reason in your own conscience. I've no right to say anything about my being sorry: you know well enough what cause I have to put you above every other friend I've got; and if it had been ordered so that you could ha' been my sister, and lived with us all our lives, I should ha' counted it the greatest blessing as could happen to us now; but Seth tells me there's no hope o' that: your feelings are different; and perhaps I'm taking too much upon me to speak about it.'

Dinah made no answer, and they walked on in silence for some yards, till they came to the stone stile; where, as Adam had passed through first, and turned round to give her his hand while she mounted the unusually high step, she could not prevent him from seeing her face. It struck him with surprise; for the grey eyes, usually so mild and grave, had the bright uneasy glance which accompanies suppressed agitation, and the slight flush in her cheeks, with which she had come down-stairs, was heightened to a deep rose-colour. She looked as if she were only sister to Dinah. Adam was silent with surprise and conjecture for some moments, and then he said –

'I hope I've not hurt or displeased you, by what I've said, Dinah: perhaps I was making too free. I've no wish different from what you see to be best; and I'm satisfied for you to live thirty mile off, if you think it right. I shall think of you just as much as I do now; for you're bound up with what I can no more help remembering, than I can help my heart beating.'

Poor Adam! Thus do men blunder. Dinah made no answer, but she presently said –

'Have you heard any news from that poor young man, since we last spoke of him?'

Dinah always called Arthur so; she had never lost the image of him as she had seen him in the prison.

'Yes,' said Adam. 'Mr Irwine read me part of a letter from him yesterday. It's pretty certain, they say, that there'll be a peace soon, though nobody believes it'll last long;[2] but he says he doesn't mean to come home. He's no heart for it yet; and it's better for others that he should keep away. Mr Irwine thinks he's in the right not to come: — it's a sorrowful letter. He asks about you and the Poysers, as he always does. There's one thing in the letter cut me a good deal: — "You can't think what an old fellow I feel," he says; "I make no schemes now. I'm the best when I've a good day's march or fighting before me."'

'He's of a rash, warm-hearted nature, like Esau, for whom I have always felt great pity,' said Dinah. 'That meeting between the brothers, where Esau is so loving and generous, and Jacob so timid and distrustful,[3] notwithstanding his sense of the Divine favour, has always touched me greatly. Truly I have been tempted sometimes to say that Jacob was of a mean spirit. But that is our trial: — we must learn to see the good in the midst of much that is unlovely.'

'Ah,' said Adam, 'I like to read about Moses best, in th' Old Testament. He carried a hard business well through, and died when other folks were going to reap the fruits:[4] a man must have courage to look at his life so, and think what'll come of it after he's dead and gone. A good solid bit o' work lasts: if it's only

laying a floor down, somebody's the better for it being done well, besides the man as does it.'

They were both glad to talk of subjects that were not personal, and in this way they went on till they passed the bridge across the Willow Brook, when Adam turned round and said –

'Ah, here's Seth. I thought he'd be home soon. Does he know of your going, Dinah?'

'Yes, I told him last Sabbath.'

Adam remembered now that Seth had come home much depressed on Sunday evening, a circumstance which had been very unusual with him of late, for the happiness he had in seeing Dinah every week seemed long to have outweighed the pain of knowing she would never marry him. This evening he had his habitual air of dreamy benignant contentment, until he came quite close to Dinah, and saw the traces of tears on her delicate eyelids and eyelashes. He gave one rapid glance at his brother; but Adam was evidently quite outside the current of emotion that had shaken Dinah: he wore his everyday look of unexpectant calm. Seth tried not to let Dinah see that he had noticed her face, and only said –

'I'm thankful you're come, Dinah, for mother's been hungering after the sight of you all day. She began to talk of you the first thing in the morning.'

When they entered the cottage, Lisbeth was seated in her arm-chair, too tired with setting out the evening meal, a task she always performed a long time beforehand, to go and meet them at the door as usual, when she heard the approaching footsteps.

'Coom, child, Thee't coom at last,' she said, when Dinah went towards her. 'What dost mane by lavin' me a week, an' Ne'er coomin' a-nigh me?'

'Dear friend,' said Dinah, taking her hand, 'you're not well. If I'd known it sooner, I'd have come.'

'An' how's thee t' know if thee dostna coom? Th' lads On'y know what I tell 'em: as long as ye can stir hand and foot the men think ye're hearty. But I'm none so bad, On'y a bit of a cold sets me achin'. An' th' lads tease me so t' ha' somebody wi' me t' do the work — they make me ache worse wi' talkin'. If thee'dst come and stay wi' me, they'd let me alone. The Poysers canna want thee so bad as I do. But take thy bonnet off, an' let me look at thee.'

Dinah was moving away, but Lisbeth held her fast while she was taking off her bonnet, and looked at her face, as one looks into a newly-gathered snowdrop, to renew the old impressions of purity and gentleness.

'What's the matter wi' thee?' said Lisbeth, in astonishment; 'thee'st been a-cryin'.'

'It's only a grief that'll pass away,' said Dinah, who did not wish just now to call forth Lisbeth's remonstrances by disclosing her intention to leave Hayslope. 'You shall know about it shortly — we'll talk of it to-night. I shall stay with you to-night.'

Lisbeth was pacified by this prospect; and she had the whole evening to talk with Dinah alone; for there was a new room in the cottage, you remember, built nearly two years ago, in the expectation of a new inmate; and here Adam always sat when he had writing to do, or plans to make. Seth sat there too this evening, for he knew his mother would like to have Dinah all to herself.

There were two pretty pictures on the two sides of the wall in the cottage. On one side there was the broad-shouldered, large-featured, hardy old woman, in her blue jacket and buff kerchief, with her dim-eyed anxious looks turned continually on the lily face and the slight form in the black dress that were either moving lightly about in helpful activity, or seated close by the old woman's arm-chair, holding her withered hand, with eyes lifted up towards her to speak a language which Lisbeth understood far better than the Bible or the hymn-book. She would scarcely listen to reading at all to-night. 'Nay, nay, shut the book,' she said. 'We mun talk. I want t' know what thee wast cryin' about. Hast got troubles o' thy own, like other folks?'

On the other side of the wall there were the two brothers, so like each other in the midst of their unlikeness: Adam, with knit brows, shaggy hair, and dark vigorous colour, absorbed in his 'figuring'; Seth, with large rugged features, the close copy of his brother's, but with thin wavy brown hair and blue dreamy eyes, as often as not looking vaguely out of the window instead of at his book although it was a newly-bought book — Wesley's abridgment of Madame Guyon's life,[5] which was full of wonder and interest for him. Seth had said to Adam, 'Can I help thee with anything in here to-night? I don't want to make a noise in the shop.'

'No, lad,' Adam answered, 'there's nothing but what I must do myself. Thee'st got thy new book to read.'

And often, when Seth was quite unconscious, Adam, as he paused after drawing a line with his ruler, looked at his brother with a kind smile dawning in his eyes. He knew 'th' lad liked to sit full o' thoughts he could give no account of; they'd never come t' anything, but they made him happy'; and in the last year or so, Adam had been getting more and more indulgent to Seth. It was part of that growing tenderness which came from the sorrow at work within him.

For Adam, though you see him quite master of himself, working hard and delighting in his work after his

inborn inalienable nature, had not outlived his sorrow — had not felt it slip from him as a temporary burthen, and leave him the same man again. Do any of us? God forbid. It would be a poor result of all our anguish and our wrestling, if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of it — if we could return to the same blind loves, the same self-confident blame, the same light thoughts of human suffering, the same frivolous gossip over blighted human lives, the same feeble sense of that Unknown towards which we have sent forth irrepressible cries in our loneliness. Let us rather be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy — the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love. Not that this transformation of pain into sympathy had completely taken place in Adam yet: there was still a great remnant of pain, and this he felt would subsist as long as *her* pain was not a memory, but an existing thing, which he must think of as renewed with the light of every new morning. But we get accustomed to mental as well as bodily pain, without, for all that, losing our sensibility to it: it becomes a habit of our lives, and we cease to imagine a condition of perfect ease as possible for us. Desire is chastened into submission; and we are contented with our day when we have been able to bear our grief in silence, and act as if we were not suffering. For it is at such periods that the sense of our lives having visible and invisible relations beyond any of which either our present or prospective self is the centre, grows like a muscle that we are obliged to lean on and exert.

That was Adam's state of mind in this second autumn of his sorrow. His work, as you know, had always been part of his religion, and from very early days he saw clearly that good carpentry was God's will — was that form of God's will that most immediately concerned him; but now there was no margin of dreams for him beyond this daylight reality, no holiday-time in the working-day world: no moment in the distance when duty would take off her iron glove and breastplate, and clasp him gently into rest. He conceived no picture of the future but one made up of hard-working days such as he lived through, with growing contentment and intensity of interest, every fresh week: love, he thought, could never be anything to him, but a living memory – a limb lopped off, but not gone from consciousness. He did not know that the power of loving was all the while gaining new force within him; that the new sensibilities bought by a deep experience were so many new fibres by which it was possible, nay, necessary to him, that his nature should intertwine with another. Yet he was aware that common affection and friendship were more precious to him than they used to be, — that he clung more to his mother and Seth, and had an unspeakable satisfaction in the sight or imagination of any small addition to their happiness. The Poysers, too — hardly three or four days passed but he felt the need of seeing them, and interchanging words and looks of friendliness with them: he would have felt this, probably, even if Dinah had not been with them; but he had only said the simplest truth in telling Dinah that he put her above all other friends in the world. Could anything be more natural? For in the darkest moments of memory the thought of her always came as the first ray of returning comfort: the early days of gloom at the Hall Farm had been gradually turned into soft moonlight by her presence; and in the cottage, too, — for she had come at every spare moment to soothe and cheer poor Lisbeth, who had been stricken with a fear that subdued even her querulousness, at the sight of her darling Adam's grief-worn face. He had become used to watching her light quiet movements, her pretty loving ways to the children, when he went to the Hall Farm; to listen for her voice as for a recurrent music; to think everything she said and did was just right, and could not have been better. In spite of his wisdom, he could not find fault with her for her over-indulgence of the children, who had managed to convert Dinah the preacher, before whom a circle of rough men had often trembled a little, into a convenient household slave; though Dinah herself was rather ashamed of this weakness, and had some inward conflict as to her departure from the precepts of Solomon.[6] Yes, there was one thing that might have been better; she might have loved Seth, and consented to marry him. He felt a little vexed, for his brother's sake; and he could not help thinking regretfully how Dinah, as Seth's wife, would have made their home as happy as it could be for them all — how she was the one being that would have soothed their mother's last days into peacefulness and rest.

'It's wonderful she doesn't love th' lad,' Adam had said sometimes to himself; 'for anybody 'ud think he was just cut out for her. But her heart's so taken up with other things. She's one o' those women that feel no drawing towards having a husband and children o' their own. She thinks she should be filled up with her own life then; and she's been used so to living in other folks's cares, she can't bear the thought of her heart being shut up from 'em. I see how it is, well enough. She's cut out o' different stuff from most women: I saw that long ago. She's never easy but when she's helping somebody, and marriage 'ud interfere with her ways, — that's true. I've no right to be contriving and thinking it 'ud be better if she'd have Seth, as if I was wiser than she is; — or than God either, for He made her what she is, and that's one o' the greatest blessings I've ever had from His hands, and others besides me.'

This self-reproof had recurred strongly to Adam's mind, when he gathered from Dinah's face that he had wounded her by referring to his wish that she had accepted Seth, and so he had endeavoured to put into the

strongest words his confidence in her decision as right — his resignation even to her going away from them, and ceasing to make part of their life otherwise than by living in their thoughts, if that separation were chosen by herself. He felt sure she knew quite well enough how much he cared to see her continually — to talk to her with the silent consciousness of a mutual great remembrance. It was not possible she should hear anything but self-renouncing affection and respect in his assurance that he was contented for her to go away; and yet there remained an uneasy feeling in his mind that he had not said quite the right thing — that, somehow, Dinah had not understood him.

Dinah must have risen a little before the sun the next morning, for she was down-stairs about five o'clock. So was Seth; for, through Lisbeth's obstinate refusal to have any woman-helper in the house, he had learned to make himself, as Adam said, 'very handy in the housework', that he might save his mother from too great weariness; on which ground I hope you will not think him unmanly, any more than you can have thought the gallant Colonel Bath unmanly when he made the gruel for his invalid sister.[7] Adam, who had sat up late at his writing, was still asleep, and was not likely, Seth said, to be down till breakfast-time. Often as Dinah had visited Lisbeth during the last eighteen months, she had never slept in the cottage since that night after Thias's death, when, you remember, Lisbeth praised her deft movements, and even gave a modified approval to her porridge. But in that long interval Dinah had made great advances in household cleverness: and this morning, since Seth was there to help, she was bent on bringing everything to a pitch of cleanliness and order that would have satisfied her aunt Poyser. The cottage was far from that standard at present, for Lisbeth's rheumatism had forced her to give up her old habits of dilettante scouring and polishing.[8] When the kitchen was to her mind, Dinah went into the new room, where Adam had been writing the night before, to see what sweeping and dusting were needed there. She opened the window and let in the fresh morning air, and the smell of the sweetbrier, and the bright low-slanting rays of the early sun, which made a glory about her pale face and pale auburn hair as she held the long brush, and swept, singing to herself in a very low tone — like a sweet summer murmur that you have to listen for very closely — one of Charles Wesley's hymns:

'Eternal Beam of Light Divine,
  Fountain of unexhausted love,
In whom the Father's glories shine,
  Lhrough earth beneath and heaven above;

Jesus! the weary wanderer's rest,
  Give me thy easy yoke to bear;
With steadfast patience arm my breast,
  With spotless love and holy fear.

Speak to my warring passions, "Peace!"
  Say to my trembling heart, "Be still!"
Thy power my strength and fortress is,
  For all things serve thy sovereign will.'

She laid by the brush and took up the duster; and if you had ever lived in Mrs Poyser's household, you would know how the duster behaved in Dinah's hand — how it went into every small corner, and on every ledge in and out of sight — how it went again and again round every bar of the chairs, and every leg, and under and over everything that lay on the table, till it came to Adam's papers and rulers, and the open desk near them. Dinah dusted up to the very edge of these, and then hesitated, looking at them with a longing but timid eye. It was painful to see how much dust there was among them. As she was looking in this way, she heard Seth's step just outside the open door, towards which her back was turned, and said, raising her clear treble –

'Seth, is your brother wrathful when his papers are stirred?'

'Yes, very, when they are not put back in the right places,' said a deep strong voice, not Seth's.

It was as if Dinah had put her hands unawares on a vibrating chord; she was shaken with an intense thrill, and for the instant felt nothing else; then she knew her cheeks were glowing, and dared not look round, but stood still, distressed because she could not say good-morning in a friendly way. Adam, finding that she did not look round so as to see the smile on his face, was afraid she had thought him serious about his wrathfulness, and went up to her, so that she was obliged to look at him.

'What! you think I'm a cross fellow at home, Dinah?' he said, smilingly.

'Nay,' said Dinah, looking up with timid eyes, 'not so. But you might be put about by finding things meddled with; and even the man Moses, the meekest of men, was wrathful sometimes.'[9]

'Come, then,' said Adam, looking at her affectionately, 'I'll help you move the things, and put 'em back

again, and then they can't get wrong. You're getting to be your aunt's own niece, I see, for particularness.'

They began their little task together, but Dinah had not recovered herself sufficiently to think of any remark, and Adam looked at her uneasily. Dinah, he thought, had seemed to disapprove him somehow lately; she had not been so kind and open to him as she used to be. He wanted her to look at him and be as pleased as he was himself with doing this bit of playful work. But Dinah did not look at him — it was easy for her to avoid looking at the tall man; and when at last there was no more dusting to be done, and no further excuse for him to linger near her, he could bear it no longer, and said, in rather a pleading tone –

'Dinah, you're not displeased with me for anything, are you? I've not said or done anything to make you think ill of me?'

The question surprised her, and relieved her by giving a new course to her feeling. She looked up at him now, quite earnestly, almost with the tears coming, and said –

'Oh, no, Adam! how could you think so?'

'I couldn't bear you not to feel as much a friend to me as I do to you,' said Adam. 'And you don't know the value I set on the very thought of you, Dinah. That was what I meant yesterday, when I said I'd be content for you to go, if you thought right. I meant, the thought of you was worth so much to me, I should feel I ought to be thankful, and not grumble, if you see right to go away. You know I do mind parting with you, Dinah?'

'Yes, dear friend,' said Dinah, trembling, but trying to speak calmly, 'I know you have a brother's heart towards me, and we shall often be with one another in spirit; but at this season I am in heaviness through manifold temptations; you must not mark me. I feel called to leave my kindred for a while; but it is a trial: the flesh is weak.'[10]

Adam saw that it pained her to be obliged to answer.

'I hurt you by talking about it, Dinah,' he said: 'I'll say no more. Let's see if Seth's ready with breakfast now.'

That is a simple scene, reader. But it is almost certain that you, too, have been in love — perhaps, even, more than once, though you may not choose to say so to all your feminine friends. If so, you will no more think the slight words, the timid looks, the tremulous touches, by which two human souls approach each other gradually, like two little quivering rain-streams, before they mingle into one — you will no more think these things trivial than you will think the first-detected signs of coming spring trivial, though they be but a faint, indescribable something in the air and in the song of the birds, and the tiniest perceptible budding on the hedgerow branches. Those slight words and looks and touches are part of the soul's language; and the finest language, I believe, is chiefly made up of unim-posing words, such as 'light', 'sound', 'stars', 'music', — words really not worth looking at, or hearing, in themselves, any more than 'chips' or 'sawdust': it is only that they happen to be the signs of something unspeakably great and beautiful. I am of opinion that love is a great and beautiful thing too; and if you agree with me, the smallest signs of it will not be chips and sawdust to you: they will rather be like those little words, 'light' and 'music', stirring the long-winding fibres of your memory, and enriching your present with your most precious past.

CHAPTER LI

Sunday Morning

Lisbeth's touch of rheumatism could not be made to appear serious enough to detain Dinah another night from the Hall Farm, now she had made up her mind to leave her aunt so soon: and at evening the friends must part. 'For a long while,' Dinah had said; for she had told Lisbeth of her resolve.

'Then it'll be for all my life, an' I shall Ne'er see thee again,' said Lisbeth. 'Long while! I'n got no long while t' live. An' I shall be took bad an' die, an' thee canst Ne'er come a-nigh me, an' I shall die a-longing for thee.'

That had been the key-note of her wailing talk all day; for Adam was not in the house, and so she put no restraint on her complaining. She had tried poor Dinah by returning again and again to the question, why she must go away; and refusing to accept reasons, which seemed to her nothing but whim and 'contrairiness'; and still more, by regretting that she 'couldna ha' one o' the lads', and be her daughter.

'Thee couldstna put up wi' Seth,' she said: 'he isna cliver enough for thee, happen; but he'd ha' been very good t' thee – he's as handy as can be at doin' things for me when I'm bad; an' he's as fond o' the Bible an' chapellin' as thee art thysen. But happen, thee'dst like a husband better as isna just the cut o' thysen: the runnin' brook isna athirst for th' rain. Adam 'ud ha' done for thee — I know he would; an' he might come t' like thee well enough, if thee'dst stop. But he's as stubborn as th' iron bar — there's no bending him no way but's own. But he'd be a fine husband for anybody, be they who they will, so looked-on an' so cliver as he is. And he'd be rare an' lovin': it does me good On'y a look o' the lad's eye, when he means kind tow'rt me.'

Dinah tried to escape from Lisbeth's closest looks and questions by finding little tasks of housework, that kept her moving about; and as soon as Seth came home in the evening she put on her bonnet to go. It touched Dinah keenly to say the last good-bye, and still more to look round on her way across the fields, and see the old woman still standing at the door, gazing after her till she must have been the faintest speck in the dim aged eyes. 'The God of love and peace be with them,' Dinah prayed, as she looked back from the last stile. 'Make them glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted them, and the years wherein they have seen evil. It is thy will that I should part from them; let me have no will but thine.'[1]

Lisbeth turned into the house at last, and sat down in the workshop near Seth, who was busying himself there with fitting some bits of turned wood he had brought from the village, into a small workbox which he meant to give to Dinah before she went away.

'Thee't see her again o' Sunday afore she goes,' were her first words. 'If thee wast good for anything, thee'dst make her come in again o' Sunday night wi' thee, an' see me once more.'

'Nay, mother,' said Seth, 'Dinah 'ud be sure to come again if she saw right to come. I should have no need to persuade her. She only thinks it 'ud be troubling thee for nought, just to come in to say good-bye over again.'

'She'd Ne'er go away, I know, if Adam 'ud be fond on her an' marry her; but everything's so contrairy,' said Lisbeth, with a burst of vexation.

Seth paused a moment, and looked up, with a slight blush, at his mother's face. 'What! has she said anything o' that sort to thee, mother?' he said, in a lower tone.

'Said? nay, she'll say nothin'. It's On'y the men as have to wait till folks say things afore they find 'em out.'

'Well, but what makes thee think so, mother? What's put it into thy head?'

'It's no matter what's put it into my head: my head's none so hollow as it must get in, an' nought to put it there. I know she's fond on him, as I know th' wind's comin' in at the door, an' that's anoof. An' he might be willin' to marry her if he know'd she's fond on him, but he'll Ne'er think on't if somebody doesna put it into's head.'

His mother's suggestion about Dinah's feeling towards Adam was not quite a new thought to Seth, but her last words alarmed him, lest she should herself undertake to open Adam's eyes. He was not sure about Dinah's feeling, and he thought he *was* sure about Adam's.

'Nay, mother, nay,' he said, earnestly, 'thee mustna think o' speaking o' such things to Adam. Thee'st no right to say what Dinah's feelings are if she hasna told thee; and it 'ud do nothing but mischief to say such

things to Adam: he feels very grateful and affectionate toward Dinah, but he's no thoughts towards her that 'ud incline him to make her his wife; and I don't believe Dinah 'ud marry him either. I don't think she'll marry at all.'

'Eh,' said Lisbeth, impatiently. 'Thee think'st so 'cause she wouldna ha' thee. She'll Ne'er marry thee; thee mightst as well like her t' ha' thy brother.'

Seth was hurt. 'Mother,' he said, in a remonstrating tone, 'don't think that of me. I should be as thankful t' have her for a sister as thee wouldst t' have her for a daughter. I've no more thoughts about myself in that thing, and I shall take it hard if ever thee say'st it again.'

'Well, well, then thee shouldstna cross me wi' sayin' things arena as I say they are.'

'But, mother,' said Seth, 'thee'dst be doing Dinah a wrong by telling Adam what thee think'st about her. It 'ud do nothing but mischief; for it 'ud make Adam uneasy if he doesna feel the same to her. And I'm pretty sure he feels nothing o' the sort.'

'Eh, donna tell me what Thee't sure on; thee know'st nought about it. What's he allays goin' to the Poysers' for, if he didna want t' see her? He goes twice where he used t' go once. Happen he knowsna as he wants t' see her; he knowsna as I put salt in's broth, but he'd miss it pretty quick if it warna there. He'll Ne'er think o' marrying if it isna put into's head; an' if thee'dst any love for thy mother, thee'dst put him up to't, an' not let her go away out o' my sight, when I might ha' her to make a bit o' comfort for me afore I go to bed to my old man under the white thorn.'

'Nay, mother,' said Seth, 'thee mustna think me unkind; but I should be going against my conscience if I took upon me to say what Dinah's feelings are. And besides that, I think I should give offence to Adam by speaking to him at all about marrying; and I counsel thee not to do't. Thee may'st be quite deceived about Dinah; nay, I'm pretty sure, by words she said to me last Sabbath, as she's no mind to marry.'

'Eh, Thee't as contrairy as the rest on 'em. If it war summat I didna want, it 'ud be done fast enough.

Lisbeth rose from the bench at this, and went out of the workshop, leaving Seth in much anxiety lest she should disturb Adam's mind about Dinah. He consoled himself after a time with reflecting that, since Adam's trouble, Lisbeth had been very timid about speaking to him on matters of feeling, and that she would hardly dare to approach this tenderest of all subjects. Even if she did, he hoped Adam would not take much notice of what she said.

Seth was right in believing that Lisbeth would be held in restraint by timidity; and during the next three days, the intervals in which she had an opportunity of speaking to Adam were too rare and short to cause her any strong temptation. But in her long solitary hours she brooded over her regretful thoughts about Dinah, till they had grown very near that point of unmanageable strength when thoughts are apt to take wing out of their secret nest in a startling manner. And on Sunday morning, when Seth went away to chapel at Treddleston, the dangerous opportunity came.

Sunday morning was the happiest time in all the week to Lisbeth; for as there was no service at Hayslope church till the afternoon, Adam was always at home, doing nothing but reading, an occupation in which she could venture to interrupt him. Moreover, she had always a better dinner than usual to prepare for her sons — very frequently for Adam and herself alone, Seth being often away the entire day; and the smell of the roast-meat before the clear fire in the clean kitchen, the clock ticking in a peaceful Sunday manner, her darling Adam seated near her in his best clothes, doing nothing very important, so that she could go and stroke her hand across his hair if she liked, and see him look up at her and smile, while Gyp, rather jealous, poked his muzzle up between them, — all these things made poor Lisbeth's earthly paradise.

The book Adam most often read on a Sunday morning was his large pictured Bible, and this morning it lay open before him on the round white deal table in the kitchen; for he sat there in spite of the fire, because he knew his mother liked to have him with her, and it was the only day in the week when he could indulge her in that way. You would have liked to see Adam reading his Bible: he never opened it on a week-day, and so he came to it as a holiday book, serving him for history, biography, and poetry. He held one hand thrust between his waistcoat buttons, and the other ready to turn the pages; and in the course of the morning you would have seen many changes in his face. Sometimes his lips moved in semi-articulation — it was when he came to a speech that he could fancy himself uttering, such as Samuel's dying speech to the people; then his eyebrows would be raised, and the corners of his mouth would quiver a little with sad sympathy — something, perhaps old Isaac's meeting with his son, touched him closely; at other times, over the New Testament, a very solemn look would come upon his face, and he would every now and then shake his head in serious assent, or just lift up his hand and let it fall again; and on some mornings, when he read in the Apocrypha, of which he was very fond, the son of Sirach's keen-edged words would bring a delighted smile, though he also enjoyed the freedom of occasionally differing from an Apocryphal writer. For Adam knew the Articles[2] quite well, as became a good churchman.

Lisbeth, in the pauses of attending to her dinner, always sat opposite to him and watched him, till she could rest no longer without going up to him and giving him a caress, to call his attention to her. This morning he was reading the Gospel according to St Matthew, and Lisbeth had been standing close by him for some minutes, stroking his hair, which was smoother than usual this morning, and looking down at the large page with silent wonderment at the mystery of letters. She was encouraged to continue this caress, because when she first went up to him, he had thrown himself back in his chair to look at her affectionately and say, 'Why, mother, thee look'st rare and hearty this morning. Eh, Gyp wants me t' look at him: he can't abide to think I love thee the best.' Lisbeth said nothing, because she wanted to say so many things. And now there was a new leaf to be turned over, and it was a picture — that of the angel seated on the great stone that has been rolled away from the sepulchre. This picture had one strong association in Lisbeth's memory, for she had been reminded of it when she first saw Dinah; and Adam had no sooner turned the page, and lifted the book sideways that they might look at the angel, than she said, 'That's her — that's Dinah.'

Adam smiled, and, looking more intently at the angel's face, said –

'It *is* a bit like her; but Dinah's prettier, I think.'

'Well, then, if thee think'st her so pretty, why arn't fond on her?'

Adam looked up in surprise. 'Why, mother, dost think I don't set store by Dinah?'

'Nay,' said Lisbeth, frightened at her own courage, yet feeling that she had broken the ice, and the waters must flow, whatever mischief they might do. 'What's th' use o' settin' store by things as are thirty mile off? If thee wast fond enough on her thee wouldstna let her go away.'

'But I've no right t' hinder her, if she thinks well,' said Adam, looking at his book as if he wanted to go on reading. He foresaw a series of complaints tending to nothing. Lisbeth sat down again in the chair opposite to him, as she said –

'But she wouldna think well if thee wastna so contrairy.' Lisbeth dared not venture beyond a vague phrase yet.

'Contrairy, mother?' Adam said, looking up again in some anxiety. 'What have I done? What dost mean?'

'Why, Thee't never look at nothin', nor think o' nothin', but thy figurin' an' thy work,' said Lisbeth, half crying. 'An' dost think thee canst go on so all thy life, as if thee wast a man cut out o' timber? An' what wut do when thy mother's gone, an' nobody to take care on thee as thee gett'st a bit o' victual comfortable i' the mornin'?'

'What hast got i' thy mind, mother?' said Adam, vexed at this whimpering. 'I canna see what Thee't driving at. Is there anything I could do for thee as I don't do?'

'Ay, an' that there is. Thee might'st do as I should ha' somebody wi' me to comfort me a bit, an' wait on me when I'm bad, an' be good to me.'

'Well, mother, whose fault is it there isna some tidy body i' th' house t' help thee? It isna by my wish as thee hast a stroke o' work to do. We can afford it — I've told thee often enough. It 'ud be a deal better for us.'

'Eh, what's the use o' talkin' o' tidy bodies, when thee mean'st one o' th' wenches out o' th' village, or somebody from Treddles'on as I Ne'er set eyes on i' my life? I'd sooner make a shift an' get into my own coffin afore I die, nor ha' them folks to put me in.'

Adam was silent, and tried to go on reading. That was the utmost severity he could show towards his mother on a Sunday morning. But Lisbeth had gone too far now to check herself, and after scarcely a minute's quietness she began again.

'Thee mightst know well enough who 'tis I'd like t' ha' wi' me. It isna many folks I send for t' come an' see me, I reckon. An' thee'st had the fetchin' on her times enow.'

'Thee mean'st Dinah, mother, I know,' said Adam. 'But it's no use setting thy mind on what can't be. If Dinah 'ud be willing to stay at Hayslope, it isn't likely she can come away from her aunt's house, where they hold her like a daughter, and where she's more bound than she is to us. If it had been so that she could ha' married Seth, that 'ud ha' been a great blessing to us, but we can't have things just as we like in this life. Thee must try and make up thy mind to do without her.'

'Nay, but I canna ma' up my mind, when she's just cut out for thee; an' nought shall ma' me believe as God didna make her an' send her there o' purpose for thee. What's it sinnify about her being a Methody? It 'ud happen wear out on her wi' marryin'.'

Adam threw himself back in his chair and looked at his mother. He understood now what she had been aiming at from the beginning of the conversation. It was as unreasonable, impracticable a wish as she had ever urged, but he could not help being moved by so entirely new an idea. The chief point, however, was to chase away the notion from his mother's mind as quickly as possible.

‘Mother,’ he said, gravely, ‘thee’t talking wild. Don’t let me hear thee say such things again. It’s no good talking o’ what can never be. Dinah’s not for marrying; she’s fixed her heart on a different sort o’ life.’

‘Very like,’ said Lisbeth, impatiently, ‘very like she’s none for marr’ing, when them as she’d be willin’ t’ marry wonna ax her. I shouldna ha’ been for marr’ing thy feyther if he’d Ne’er axed me; an’ she’s as fond o’ thee as e’er I war o’ thias, poor fellow.’

The blood rushed to Adam’s face, and for a few moments he was not quite conscious where he was: his mother and the kitchen had vanished for him, and he saw nothing but Dinah’s face turned up towards his. It seemed as if there were a resurrection of his dead joy. But he woke up very speedily from that dream (the waking was chill and sad); for it would have been very foolish in him to believe his mother’s words; she could have no ground for them. He was prompted to express his disbelief very strongly — perhaps that he might call forth the proofs, if there were any to be offered.

‘What dost say such things for, mother, when thee’st got no foundation for ’em? Thee know’st nothing as gives thee a right to say that.’

‘Then I knowna nought as gi’es me a right to say as the year’s turned, for all I feel it fust thing when I get up i’ th’ mornin’. She isna fond o’ Seth, I reckon, is she? She doesna want to marry *him?* But I can see as she doesna behave tow’rt thee as she does tow’rt Seth. She makes no more o’ Seth’s coming a-nigh her nor if he war Gyp, but she’s all of a tremble when Thee’t a-sittin’ down by her at breakfast, an’ a-looking at her. Thee think’st thy mother knows nought, but she war alive afore thee wast born.’

‘But thee canstna be sure as the trembling means love?’ said Adam, anxiously.

‘Eh, what else should it mane? It isna hate, I reckon. An’ what should she do but love thee? Thee’t made to be loved – for where’s there a straighter, cliverer man? An’ what’s it sinnify her bein’ a Methody? It’s On’y the marigold i’ th’ parridge.’

Adam had thrust his hands in his pockets, and was looking down at the book on the table, without seeing any of the letters. He was trembling like a gold-seeker, who sees the strong promise of gold, but sees in the same moment a sickening vision of disappointment. He could not trust his mother’s insight; she had seen what she wished to see. And yet — and yet, now the suggestion had been made to him, he remembered so many things, very slight things, like the stirring of the water by an imperceptible breeze, which seemed to him some confirmation of his mother’s words.

Lisbeth noticed that he was moved. She went on –

‘An’ Thee’t find out as Thee’t poorly aff when she’s gone. Thee’t fonder on her nor thee know’st. Thy eyes follow her about, welly as Gyp’s follow thee.’

Adam could sit still no longer. He rose, took down his hat, and went out into the fields.

The sunshine was on them: that early autumn sunshine which we should know was not summer’s, even if there were not the touches of yellow on the lime and chestnut: the Sunday sunshine, too, which has more than autumnal calmness for the working man: the morning sunshine, which still leaves the dew-crystals on the fine gossamer webs in the shadow of the bushy hedgerows.

Adam needed the calm influence; he was amazed at the way in which this new thought of Dinah’s love had taken possession of him, with an overmastering power that made all other feelings give way before the impetuous desire to know that the thought was true. Strange, that till that moment the possibility of their ever being lovers had never crossed his mind, and yet now, all his longing suddenly went out towards that possibility; he had no more doubt or hesitation as to his own wishes than the bird that flies towards the opening through which the daylight gleams and the breath of heaven enters.

The autumnal Sunday sunshine soothed him; but not by preparing him with resignation to the disappointment if his mother — if he himself, proved to be mistaken about Dinah: it soothed him by gentle encouragement of his hopes. Her love was so like that calm sunshine that they seemed to make one presence to him, and he believed in them both alike. And Dinah was so bound up with the sad memories of his first passion, that he was not forsaking them, but rather giving them a new sacredness by loving her. Nay, his love for her had grown out of that past: it was the noon of that morning.

But Seth? Would the lad be hurt? Hardly; for he had seemed quite contented of late, and there was no selfish jealousy in him; he had never been jealous of his mother’s fondness for Adam. But had *be* seen anything of what their mother talked about? Adam longed to know this, for he thought he could trust Seth’s observation better than his mother’s. He must talk to Seth before he went to see Dinah; and, with this intention in his mind, he walked back to the cottage and said to his mother –

‘Did Seth say anything to thee about when he was coming home? Will he be back to dinner?’

‘Ay, lad; he’ll be back for a wonder. He isna gone to Treddles’on. He’s gone somewhere else a-preachin’ and a-prayin’.’

‘Hast any notion which way he’s gone?’ said Adam.

‘Nay, but he aften goes to th’ Common. Thee know’st more o’s goings nor I do.’

Adam wanted to go and meet Seth, but he must content himself with walking about the near fields and getting sight of him as soon as possible. That would not be for more than an hour to come, for Seth would scarcely be at home much before their dinner-time, which was twelve o’clock. But Adam could not sit down to his reading again, and he sauntered along by the brook and stood leaning against the stiles, with eager, intense eyes, which looked as if they saw something very vividly; but it was not the brook or the willows, not the fields or the sky. Again and again his vision was interrupted by wonder at the strength of his own feeling, at the strength and sweetness of this new love — almost like the wonder a man feels at the added power he finds in himself for an art which he had laid aside for a space. How is it that the poets have said so many fine things about our first love, so few about our later love? Are their first poems their best? or are not those the best which come from their fuller thought, their larger experience, their deeper-rooted affections? The boy’s flute-like voice has its own spring charm; but the man should yield a richer, deeper music.

At last, there was Seth, visible at the farthest stile, and Adam hastened to meet him. Seth was surprised, and thought something unusual must have happened: but when Adam came up, his face said plainly enough that it was nothing alarming.

‘Where hast been?’ said Adam, when they were side by side.

‘I’ve been to the Common,’ said Seth. ‘Dinah’s been speaking the Word to a little company of hearers at Brimstone’s, as they call him. They’re folks as never go to church hardly — them on the Common — but they’ll go and hear Dinah a bit. She’s been speaking with power this forenoon from the words, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”[3] And there was a little thing happened as was pretty to see. The women mostly bring their children with ’em, but to-day there was one stout curly-headed fellow about three or four year old, that I never saw there before. He was as naughty as could be at the beginning while I was praying, and while we was singing, but when we all sat down and Dinah began to speak, th’ young un stood stock-still all at once, and began to look at her with’s mouth open, and presently he ran away from’s mother and went up to Dinah, and pulled at her, like a little dog, for her to take notice of him. So Dinah lifted him up and held th’ lad on her lap, while she went on speaking; and he was as good as could be till he went to sleep — and the mother cried to see him.’

‘It’s a pity she shouldna be a mother herself,’ said Adam, ‘so fond as the children are of her. Dost think she’s quite fixed against marrying, Seth? Dost think nothing ’ud turn her?’

There was something peculiar in his brother’s tone, which made Seth steal a glance at his face before he answered.

‘It ’ud be wrong of me to say nothing ’ud turn her,’ he answered. ‘But if thee mean’st it about myself, I’ve given up all thoughts as she can ever be *my* wife. She calls me her brother, and that’s enough.’

‘But dost think she might ever get fond enough of anybody else to be willing to marry ’em?’ said Adam, rather shyly.

‘Well,’ said Seth, after some hesitation, ‘it’s crossed my mind sometimes o’ late as she might; but Dinah ’ud let no fondness for the creature draw her out o’ the path as she believed God had marked out for her. If she thought the leading was not from Him, she’s not one to be brought under the power of it. And she’s allays seemed clear about that — as her work was to minister t’ others, and make no home for herself i’ this world.’

‘But suppose,’ said Adam, earnestly, ‘suppose there was a man as ’ud let her do just the same and not interfere with her, — she might do a good deal o’ what she does now, just as well when she was married as when she was single. Other women of her sort have married — that’s to say, not just like her, but women as preached and attended on the sick and needy. There’s Mrs Fletcher[4] as she talks of.’

A new light had broken in on Seth. He turned round, and laying his hand on Adam’s shoulder, said, ‘Why, wouldst like her to marry *thee,* brother?’

Adam looked doubtfully at Seth’s inquiring eyes, and said, ‘Wouldst be hurt if she was to be fonder o’ me than o’ thee?’

‘Nay,’ said Seth, warmly, ‘how canst think it? Have I felt thy trouble so little, that I shouldna feel thy joy?’

There was silence a few moments as they walked on, and then Seth said –

‘I’d no notion as thee’dst ever think of her for a wife.’

‘But is it o’ any use to think of her?’ said Adam — ‘what dost say? Mother’s made me as I hardly know where I am, with what she’s been saying to me this forenoon. She says she’s sure Dinah feels for me more than common, and ’ud be willing t’ have me. But I’m afraid she speaks without book.[5] I want to know if thee’st seen anything.’

‘It’s a nice point to speak about,’ said Seth, ‘and I’m afraid o’ being wrong; besides, we’ve no right t’ intermeddle with people’s feelings when they wouldn’t tell ’em themselves.’

Seth paused.

‘But thee mightst ask her,’ he said, presently. ‘She took no offence at *me* for asking, and thee’st more right than I had, only Thee’t not in the Society. But Dinah doesn’t hold wi’ them as are for keeping the Society so strict to themselves. She doesn’t mind about making folks enter the Society, so as they’re fit t’ enter the kingdom o’ God. Some o’ the brethren at Treddles’on are displeased with her for that.’

‘Where will she be the rest o’ the day?’ said Adam.

‘She said she shouldn’t leave the Farm again to-day,’ said Seth, ‘because it’s her last Sabbath there, and she’s going t’ read out o’ the big Bible wi’ the children.’

Adam thought — but did not say — ‘Then I’ll go this afternoon; for if I go to church my thoughts ’ull be with her all the while. They must sing th’ anthem without me to-day.’

CHAPTER LII

Adam and Dinah

It was about three o'clock when Adam entered the farmyard and roused Alick and the dogs from their Sunday dozing. Alick said everybody was gone to church 'but th' young missis' — so he called Dinah; but this did not disappoint Adam, although the 'everybody' was so liberal as to include Nancy the dairy-maid, whose works of necessity were not unfrequently incompatible with church-going.

There was perfect stillness about the house: the doors were closed, and the very stones and tubs seemed quieter than usual. Adam heard the water gently dripping from the pump — that was the only sound; and he knocked at the house door rather softly, as was suitable in that stillness.

The door opened, and Dinah stood before him, colouring deeply with the great surprise of seeing Adam at this hour, when she knew it was his regular practice to be at church. Yesterday he would have said to her without any difficulty, 'I came to see you, Dinah: I knew the rest were not at home.' But to-day something prevented him from saying that, and he put out his hand to her in silence. Neither of them spoke, and yet both wished they could speak, as Adam entered, and they sat down. Dinah took the chair she had just left; it was at the corner of the table near the window, and there was a book lying on the table, but it was not open: she had been sitting perfectly still, looking at the small bit of clear fire in the bright grate. Adam sat down opposite her, in Mr Poyser's three-cornered chair.

'Your mother is not ill again, I hope, Adam?' Dinah said, recovering herself. 'Seth said she was well this morning.'

'No, she's very hearty to-day,' said Adam, happy in the signs of Dinah's feeling at the sight of him, but shy.

'There's nobody at home, you see,' Dinah said; 'but you'll wait. You've been hindered from going to church to-day, doubtless.'

'Yes,' Adam said, and then paused, before he added, 'I was thinking about you: that was the reason.'

This confession was very awkward and sudden, Adam felt; for he thought Dinah must understand all he meant. But the frankness of the words caused her immediately to interpret them into a renewal of his brotherly regrets that she was going away, and she answered calmly –

'Do not be careful and troubled for me, Adam. I have all things and abound at Snowfield. And my mind is at rest, for I am not seeking my own will in going.'

'But if things were different, Dinah,' said Adam, hesitatingly — 'if you knew things that perhaps you don't know now.'…

Dinah looked at him inquiringly, but instead of going on, he reached a chair and brought it near the corner of the table where she was sitting. She wondered and was afraid — and the next moment her thoughts flew to the past: was it something about those distant unhappy ones that she didn't know?

Adam looked at her: it was so sweet to look at her eyes, which had now a self-forgetful questioning in them, — for a moment he forgot that he wanted to say anything, or that it was necessary to tell her what he meant.

'Dinah,' he said suddenly, taking both her hands between his, 'I love you with my whole heart and soul. I love you next to God who made me.'

Dinah's lips became pale, like her cheeks, and she trembled violently under the shock of painful joy. Her hands were cold as death between Adam's. She could not draw them away, because he held them fast.

'Don't tell me you can't love me, Dinah. Don't tell me we must part, and pass our lives away from one another.'

The tears were trembling in Dinah's eyes, and they fell before she could answer. But she spoke in a quiet low voice.

'Yes, dear Adam, we must submit to another Will. We must part.'

'Not if you love me, Dinah — not if you love me,' Adam said, passionately. 'Tell me — tell me if you can love me better than a brother?'

Dinah was too entirely reliant on the Supreme guidance to attempt to achieve any end by a deceptive

concealment. She was recovering now from the first shock of emotion, and she looked at Adam with simple sincere eyes as she said –

'Yes, Adam, my heart is drawn strongly towards you; and of my own will, if I had no clear showing to the contrary, I could find my happiness in being near you, and ministering to you continually. I fear I should forget to rejoice and weep with others; nay, I fear I should forget the Divine presence, and seek no love but yours.'[1]

Adam did not speak immediately. They sat looking at each other in delicious silence, — for the first sense of mutual love excludes other feelings; it will have the soul all to itself.

'Then, Dinah,' Adam said at last, 'how can there be anything contrary to what's right in our belonging to one another, and spending our lives together? Who put this great love into our hearts? Can anything be holier than that? For we can help one another in everything as is good. I'd never think o' putting myself between you and God, and saying you oughtn't to do this, and you oughtn't to do that. You'd follow your conscience as much as you do now.'

'Yes, Adam,' Dinah said, 'I know marriage is a holy state[2] for those who are truly called to it, and have no other drawing; but from my childhood upward I have been led towards another path; all my peace and my joy have come from having no life of my own, no wants, no wishes for myself, and living only in God and those of his creatures whose sorrows and joys he has given me to know. Those have been very blessed years to me, and I feel that if I was to listen to any voice that would draw me aside from that path, I should be turning my back on the light that has shone upon me, and darkness and doubt would take hold of me. We could not bless each other, Adam, if there were doubts in my soul, and if I yearned, when it was too late, after that better part[3] which had once been given me and I had put away from me.'

'But if a new feeling has come into your mind, Dinah, and if you love me so as to be willing to be nearer to me than to other people, isn't that a sign that it's right for you to change your life? Doesn't the love make it right when nothing else would?'

'Adam, my mind is full of questionings about that; for now, since you tell me of your strong love towards me, what was clear to me has become dark again. I felt before that my heart was too strongly drawn towards you, and that your heart was not as mine; and the thought of you had taken hold of me, so that my soul had lost its freedom, and was becoming enslaved to an earthly affection, which made me anxious and careful about what should befall myself. For in all other affection I had been content with any small return, or with none; but my heart was beginning to hunger after an equal love from you. And I had no doubt that I must wrestle against that as a great temptation; and the command was clear that I must go away.'

'But now, dear, dear Dinah, now you know I love you better than you love me… it's all different now. You won't think o' going: you'll stay, and be my dear wife, and I shall thank God for giving me my life as I never thanked him before.'

'Adam, it's hard to me to turn a deaf ear… you know it's hard; but a great fear is upon me. It seems to me as if you were stretching out your arms to me, and beckoning me to come and take my ease, and live for my own delight, and Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, was standing looking towards me, and pointing to the sinful, and suffering, and afflicted. I have seen that again and again when I have been sitting in stillness and darkness, and a great terror has come upon me lest I should become hard, and a lover of self,[4] and no more bear willingly the Redeemer's cross.'

Dinah had closed her eyes, and a faint shudder went through her. 'Adam,' she went on, 'you wouldn't desire that we should seek a good through any unfaithfulness to the light that is in us; you wouldn't believe that could be a good. We are of one mind in that.'

'Yes, Dinah,' said Adam, sadly, 'I'll never be the man t' urge you against your conscience. But I can't give up the hope that you may come to see different. I don't believe your loving me could shut up your heart; it's only adding to what you've been before, not taking away from it; for it seems to me it's the same with love and happiness as with sorrow — the more we know of it the better we can feel what other people's lives are or might be, and so we shall only be more tender to 'em, and wishful to help 'em. The more knowledge a man has, the better he'll do's work; and feeling's a sort o' knowledge.'

Dinah was silent; her eyes were fixed in contemplation of something visible only to herself. Adam went on presently with his pleading –

'And you can do almost as much as you do now. I won't ask you to go to church with me of a Sunday; you shall go where you like among the people, and teach 'em; for though I like church best, I don't put my soul above yours, as if my words was better for you to follow than your own conscience. And you can help the sick just as much, and you'll have more means o' making 'em a bit comfortable; and you'll be among all your own friends as love you, and can help 'em and be a blessing to 'em till their dying day. Surely, Dinah, you'd be as near to God as if you was living lonely and away from me.'

Dinah made no answer for some time. Adam was still holding her hands, and looking at her with almost trembling anxiety, when she turned her grave loving eyes on his, and said, in rather a sad voice –

'Adam, there is truth in what you say, and there's many of the brethren and sisters who have greater strength than I have, and find their hearts enlarged by the cares of husband and kindred. But I have not faith that it would be so with me, for since my affections have been set above measure on you, I have had less peace and joy in God; I have felt as it were a division in my heart. And think how it is with me, Adam: — that life I have led is like a land I have trodden in blessedness since my childhood; and if I long for a moment to follow the voice which calls me to another land that I know not, I cannot but fear that my soul might hereafter yearn for that early blessedness which I had forsaken;[5] and where doubt enters, there is not perfect love. I must wait for clearer guidance: I must go from you, and we must submit ourselves entirely to the Divine Will. We are sometimes required to lay our natural, lawful affections on the altar.'

Adam dared not plead again, for Dinah's was not the voice of caprice or insincerity. But it was very hard for him; his eyes got dim as he looked at her.

'But you may come to feel satisfied… to feel that you may come to me again, and we may never part, Dinah?'

'We must submit ourselves, Adam. With time, our duty will be made clear. It may be, when I have entered on my former life, I shall find all these new thoughts and wishes vanish, and become as things that were not. Then I shall know that my calling is not towards marriage. But we must wait.'

'Dinah,' said Adam, mournfully, 'you can't love me so well as I love you, else you'd have no doubts. But it's natural you shouldn't; for I'm not so good as you. I can't doubt it's right for me to love the best thing God's ever given me to know.'

'Nay, Adam; it seems to me that my love for you is not weak; for my heart waits on your words and looks, almost as a little child waits on the help and tenderness of the strong on whom it depends. If the thought of you took slight hold of me, I should not fear that it would be an idol in the temple. But you will strengthen me — you will not hinder me in seeking to obey to the uttermost.'

'Let us go out into the sunshine, Dinah, and walk together. I'll speak no word to disturb you.'

They went out and walked towards the fields, where they would meet the family coming from church. Adam said, 'Take my arm, Dinah', and she took it. That was the only change in their manner to each other since they were last walking together. But no sadness in the prospect of her going away — in the uncertainty of the issue — could rob the sweetness from Adam's sense that Dinah loved him. He thought he would stay at the Hall Farm all that evening. He would be near her as long as he could.

'Heyday! there's Adam along wi' Dinah,' said Mr Poyser, as he opened the far gate into the Home Close. 'I couldna think how he happened away from church. Why,' added good Martin, after a moment's pause, 'what dost think has just jumped into my head?'

'Summat as hadna far to jump, for it's just under our nose. You mean as Adam's fond o' Dinah.'

'Ay! hast ever had any notion of it before?'

'To be sure I have,' said Mrs Poyser, who always declined, if possible, to be taken by surprise. 'I'm not one o' those as can see the cat i' the dairy, an' wonder what she's come after.'

'Thee never saidst a word to me about it.'

'Well, I aren't like a bird-clapper, forced to make a rattle when the wind blows on me. I can keep my own counsel when there's no good i' speaking.'

'But Dinah 'ull ha' none o' him; dost think she will?'

'Nay,' said Mrs Poyser, not sufficiently on her guard against a possible surprise; 'she'll never marry anybody, if he isn't a Methodist and a cripple.'

'It 'ud ha' been a pretty thing though for 'em t' marry,' said Martin, turning his head on one side, as if in pleased contemplation of his new idea. 'Thee'dst ha' liked it too, wouldstna? '

'Ah! I should. I should ha' been sure of her then, as she wouldn't go away from me to Snowfield, welly thirty mile off, and me not got a creatur to look to, only neighbours, as are no kin to me, an' most of 'em women as I'd be ashamed to show my face, if *my* dairy things war like their'n. There may well be streaky butter i' the market. An' I should be glad to see the poor thing settled like a Christian woman, with a house of her own over her head; and we'd stock her well wi' linen and feathers; for I love her next to my own children. An' she makes one feel safer when she's i' the house; for she's like the driven snow: anybody might sin for two as had her at their elbow.'

'Dinah,' said Tommy, running forward to meet her, 'mother says you'll never marry anybody but a Methodist cripple. What a silly you must be!' a comment which Tommy followed up by seizing Dinah with both arms, and dancing along by her side with incommodious fondness.

'Why, Adam, we missed you i' the singing to-day,' said Mr Poyser. 'How was it?'

‘I wanted to see Dinah: she’s going away so soon,’ said Adam.

‘Ah, lad! can you persuade her to stop somehow? Find her a good husband somewhere i’ the parish. If you’ll do that, we’ll forgive you for missing church. But, anyway, she isna going before the harvest-supper o’ Wednesday, and you must come then. There’s Bartle Massey comin’, an’ happen Craig. You’ll be sure an’ come, now, at seven? The missus wunna have it a bit later.’

‘Ay,’ said Adam, ‘I’ll come if I can. But I can’t often say what I’ll do beforehand, for the work often holds me longer than I expect. You’ll stay till the end o’ the week, Dinah?’

‘Yes, yes!’ said Mr Poyser; ‘we’ll have no nay.’

‘She’s no call to be in a hurry,’ observed Mrs Poyser. ‘Scarceness o’ victual ’ull keep: there’s no need to be hasty wi’ the cooking. An’ scarceness is what there’s the biggest stock of i’ that country.’

Dinah smiled, but gave no promise to stay, and they talked of other things through the rest of the walk, lingering in the sunshine to look at the great flock of geese grazing, at the new corn-ricks, and at the surprising abundance of fruit on the old pear-tree; Nancy and Molly having already hastened home, side by side, each holding, carefully wrapped in her pocket-handkerchief, a prayer-book, in which she could read little beyond the large letters and the Amens.

Surely all other leisure is hurry compared with a sunny walk through the fields from ‘afternoon church’, — as such walks used to be in those old leisurely times, when the boat, gliding sleepily along the canal, was the newest locomotive wonder; when Sunday books had most of them old brown-leather covers, and opened with remarkable precision always in one place. Leisure is gone — gone where the spinning-wheels are gone, and the pack-horses, and the slow waggons, and the pedlars, who brought bargains to the door on sunny afternoons. Ingenious philosophers tell you, perhaps, that the great work of the steam-engine is to create leisure for mankind. Do not believe them: it only creates a vacuum for eager thought to rush in. Even idleness is eager now — eager for amusement: prone to excursion-trains, art-museums, periodical literature, and exciting novels: prone even to scientific theorizing, and cursory peeps through microscopes. Old Leisure was quite a different personage: he only read one newspaper, innocent of leaders, and was free from that periodicity of sensations which we call post-time.[6] He was a contemplative, rather stout gentleman, of excellent digestion, — of quiet perceptions, undiseased by hypothesis: happy in his inability to know the causes of things, preferring the things themselves. He lived chiefly in the country, among pleasant seats and homesteads, and was fond of sauntering by the fruit-tree wall, and scenting the apricots when they were warmed by the morning sunshine, or of sheltering himself under the orchard boughs at noon, when the summer pears were falling. He knew nothing of week-day services, and thought none the worse of the Sunday sermon if it allowed him to sleep from the text to the blessing — liking the afternoon service best, because the prayers were the shortest, and not ashamed to say so; for he had an easy, jolly conscience, broad-backed like himself, and able to carry a great deal of beer or port-wine, — not being made squeamish by doubts and qualms and lofty aspirations. Life was not a task to him, but a sinecure: he fingered the guineas in his pocket, and ate his dinners, and slept the sleep of the irresponsible; for had he not kept up his charter by going to church on the Sunday afternoons?

Fine old Leisure! Do not be severe upon him, and judge him by our modern standard: he never went to Exeter Hall, or heard a popular preacher, or read *Tracts for the Times* or *Sartor Resartus*.[7]

CHAPTER LIII

The Harvest Supper

As Adam was going homewards, on Wednesday evening, in the six o'clock sunlight, he saw in the distance the last load of barley winding its way towards the yard-gate of the Hall Farm, and heard the chant of 'Harvest Home!'[1] rising and sinking like a wave. Fainter and fainter, and more musical through the growing distance, the falling dying sound still reached him, as he neared the Willow Brook. The low westering sun shone right on the shoulders of the old Binton Hills, turning the unconscious sheep into bright spots of light; shone on the windows of the cottage too, and made them a-flame with a glory beyond that of amber or amethyst. It was enough to make Adam feel that he was in a great temple, and that the distant chant was a sacred song.

'It's wonderful,' he thought, 'how that sound goes to one's heart almost like a funeral-bell, for all it tells one o' the joy-fullest time o' the year, and the time when men are mostly the thankfullest. I suppose it's a bit hard to us to think anything's over and gone in our lives; and there's a parting at the root of all our joys. It's like what I feel about Dinah: I should never ha' come to know that her love 'ud be the greatest o' blessings to me, if what I counted a blessing hadn't been wrenched and torn away from me, and left me with a greater need, so as I could crave and hunger for a greater and a better comfort.'

He expected to see Dinah again this evening, and get leave to accompany her as far as Oakbourne; and then he would ask her to fix some time when he might go to Snowfield, and learn whether the last best hope that had been born to him must be resigned like the rest. The work he had to do at home, besides putting on his best clothes, made it seven before he was on his way again to the Hall Farm, and it was questionable whether, with his longest and quickest strides, he should be there in time even for the roast-beef, which came after the plum-pudding;[2] for Mrs Poyser's supper would be punctual.

Great was the clatter of knives and pewter plates and tin cans when Adam entered the house, but there was no hum of voices to this accompaniment: the eating of excellent roast-beef, provided free of expense, was too serious a business to those good farm-labourers to be performed with a divided attention, even if they had had anything to say to each other, — which they had not; and Mr Poyser, at the head of the table, was too busy with his carving to listen to Bartle Massey's or Mr Craig's ready talk.

'Here, Adam,' said Mrs Poyser, who was standing and looking on to see that Molly and Nancy did their duty as waiters, 'here's a place kept for you between Mr Massey and the boys. It's a poor tale you couldn't come to see the pudding when it was whole.'

Adam looked anxiously round for a fourth woman's figure; but Dinah was not there. He was almost afraid of asking about her; besides, his attention was claimed by greetings, and there remained the hope that Dinah was in the house, though perhaps disinclined to festivities on the eve of her departure.

It was a goodly sight — that table with Martin Poyser's round good-humoured face and large person at the head of it, helping his servants to the fragrant roast-beef, and pleased when the empty plates came again. Martin, though usually blest with a good appetite, really forgot to finish his own beef to-night — it was so pleasant to him to look on in the intervals of carving, and see how the others enjoyed their supper; for were they not men who, on all the days of the year except Christmas Day and Sundays, ate their cold dinner, in a make-shift manner, under the hedgerows, and drank their beer out of wooden bottles – with relish certainly, but with their mouths towards the zenith, after a fashion more endurable to ducks than to human bipeds. Martin Poyser had some faint conception of the flavour such men must find in hot roast-beef and fresh-drawn ale. He held his head on one side, and screwed up his mouth, as he nudged Bartle Massey, and watched half-witted Tom Tholer, otherwise known as 'Tom Saft',[3] receiving his second plateful of beef. A grin of delight broke over Tom's face as the plate was set down before him, between his knife and fork, which he held erect, as if they had been sacred tapers; but the delight was too strong to continue smouldering in a grin — it burst out the next instant in a long-drawn 'haw, haw!' followed by a sudden collapse into utter gravity, as the knife and fork darted down on the prey. Martin Poyser's large person shook with his silent unctuous laugh: he turned towards Mrs Poyser to see if she, too, had been observant of Tom, and the eyes of husband and wife met in a glance of good-natured amusement.

'Tom Saft' was a great favourite on the farm, where he played the part of the old jester, and made up for

his practical deficiencies by his success in repartee. His hits, I imagine, were those of the flail, which falls quite at random, but nevertheless smashes an insect now and then. They were much quoted at sheep-shearing and haymaking times; but I refrain from recording them here, lest Tom's wit should prove to be like that of many other bygone jesters eminent in their day — rather of a temporary nature, not dealing with the deeper and more lasting relations of things.

Tom excepted, Martin Poyser had some pride in his servants and labourers, thinking with satisfaction that they were the best worth their pay of any set on the estate. There was Kester Bale, for example (Beale, probably, if the truth were known, but he was called Bale, and was not conscious of any claim to a fifth letter), — the old man with the close leather cap, and the network of wrinkles on his sun-browned face. Was there any man in Loamshire who knew better the 'natur' of all farming work? He was one of those invaluable labourers who can not only turn their hand to everything, but excel in everything they turn their hand to. It is true Kester's knees were much bent outward by this time, and he walked with a perpetual curtsy, as if he were among the most reverent of men. And so he was; but I am obliged to admit that the object of his reverence was his own skill, towards which he performed some rather affecting acts of worship. He always thatched the ricks;[4] for if anything were his forte more than another, it was thatching; and when the last touch had been put to the last beehive rick, Kester, whose home lay at some distance from the farm, would take a walk to the rick-yard in his best clothes on a Sunday morning, and stand in the lane, at a due distance, to contemplate his own thatching, — walking about to get each rick from the proper point of view. As he curtsied along, with his eyes upturned to the straw knobs imitative of golden globes at the summits of the beehive ricks, which indeed were gold of the best sort, you might have imagined him to be engaged in some pagan act of adoration. Kester was an old bachelor, and reputed to have stockings full of coin, concerning which his master cracked a joke with him every pay-night: not a new, unseasoned joke, but a good old one, that had been tried many times before, and had worn well. 'Th' young measter's a merry mon,' Kester frequently remarked; for having begun his career by frightening away the crows under the last Martin Poyser but one, he could never cease to account the reigning Martin a young master. I am not ashamed of commemorating old Kester: you and I are indebted to the hard hands of such men — hands that have long ago mingled with the soil they tilled so faithfully, thriftily making the best they could of the earth's fruits, and receiving the smallest share as their own wages.

Then, at the end of the table, opposite his master, there was Alick, the shepherd and head man, with the ruddy face and broad shoulders, not on the best terms with old Kester; indeed, their intercourse was confined to an occasional snarl, for though they probably differed little concerning hedging and ditching and the treatment of ewes, there was a profound difference of opinion between them as to their own respective merits. When Tityrus and Melibœus[5] happen to be on the same farm, they are not sentimentally polite to each other. Alick, indeed, was not by any means a honeyed man: his speech had usually something of a snarl in it, and his broad-shouldered aspect something of the bull-dog expression — 'Don't you meddle with me, and I won't meddle with you'; but he was honest even to the splitting of an oat-grain rather than he would take beyond his acknowledged share, and as 'close-fisted' with his master's property as if it had been his own, — throwing very small handfuls of damaged barley to the chickens, because a large handful affected his imagination painfully with a sense of profusion. Good-tempered Tim, the waggoner, who loved his horses, had his grudge against Alick in the matter of corn: they rarely spoke to each other, and never looked at each other, even over their dish of cold potatoes; but then, as this was their usual mode of behaviour towards all mankind, it would be an unsafe conclusion that they had more than transient fits of unfriendliness. The bucolic character at Hayslope, you perceive, was not of that entirely genial, merry, broad-grinning sort, apparently observed in most districts visited by artists. The mild radiance of a smile was a rare sight on a field labourer's face, and there was seldom any gradation between bovine gravity and a laugh. Nor was every labourer so honest as our friend Alick. At this very table, among Mr Poyser's men, there is that big Ben Tholoway, a very powerful thresher, but detected more than once in carrying away his master's corn in his pockets: an action which, as Ben was not a philosopher, could hardly be ascribed to absence of mind. However, his master had forgiven him, and continued to employ him; for the Tholoways had lived on the Common, time out of mind, and had always worked for the Poysers. And on the whole, I daresay, society was not much the worse because Ben had not six months of it at the treadmill; for his views of depredation were narrow, and the House of Correction[6] might have enlarged them. As it was, Ben ate his roast-beef to-night with a serene sense of having stolen nothing more than a few peas and beans as seed for his garden, since the last harvest-supper, and felt warranted in thinking that Alick's suspicious eye, for ever upon him, was an injury to his innocence.

But *now* the roast-beef was finished, and the cloth was drawn, leaving a fair large deal table for the bright drinking-cans, and the foaming brown jugs, and the bright brass candle-sticks, pleasant to behold. *Now,* the great ceremony of the evening was to begin — the harvest-song, in which every man must join: he might be

in tune, if he liked to be singular, but he must not sit with closed lips. The movement was obliged to be in triple time; the rest was *ad libitum.*[7]

As to the origin of this song — whether it came in its actual state from the brain of a single rhapsodist, or was gradually perfected by a school or succession of rhapsodists, I am ignorant. There is a stamp of unity, of individual genius, upon it, which inclines me to the former hypothesis, though I am not blind to the consideration that this unity may rather have arisen from that consensus of many minds which was a condition of primitive thought, foreign to our modern consciousness. Some will perhaps think that they detect in the first quatrain an indication of a lost line, which later rhapsodists, failing in imaginative vigour, have supplied by the feeble device of iteration: others, however, may rather maintain that this very iteration is an original felicity, to which none but the most prosaic minds can be insensible.

The ceremony connected with the song was a drinking ceremony. (That is perhaps a painful fact, but then, you know, we cannot reform our forefathers.) During the first and second quatrain, sung decidedly *forte,* no can was filled.

> ‘Here’s a health unto our master,
> The founder of the feast;
> Here’s a health unto our master
> And to our mistress!
>
> And may his doings prosper,
> Whate’er he takes in hand,
> For we are all his servants,
> And are at his command.’

But now, immediately before the third quatrain or chorus, sung *fortissimo,* with emphatic raps of the table, which gave the effect of cymbals and drum together, Alick’s can was filled, and he was bound to empty it before the chorus ceased.

> ‘Thon drink, boys, drink!
> And see ye do not spill,
> For if ye do, ye shall drink two,
> For ’tis our master’s will.’[8]

When Alick had gone successfully through this test of steady-handed manliness, it was the turn of old Kester, at his right hand, — and so on, till every man had drunk his initiatory pint under the stimulus of the chorus. Tom Saft — the rogue — took care to spill a little by accident; but Mrs Poyser (too officiously, Tom thought) interfered to prevent the exaction of the penalty.

To any listener outside the door it would have been the reverse of obvious why the ‘Drink, boys, drink!’ should have such an immediate and often-repeated encore; but once entered, he would have seen that all faces were at present sober, and most of them serious: it was the regular and respectable thing for those excellent farm-labourers to do, as much as for elegant ladies and gentlemen to smirk and bow over their wine-glasses. Bartle Massey, whose ears were rather sensitive, had gone out to see what sort of evening it was, at an early stage in the ceremony; and had not finished his contemplation until a silence of five minutes declared that ‘Drink, boys, drink!’ was not likely to begin again for the next twelvemonth. Much to the regret of the boys and Totty: on them the stillness fell rather flat, after that glorious thumping of the table, towards which Totty, seated on her father’s knee, contributed with her small might and small fist.

When Bartle re-entered, however, there appeared to be a general desire for solo music after the choral. Nancy declared that Tim the waggoner knew a song and was ‘allays singing like a lark i’ the stable’; whereupon Mr Poyser said encouragingly, ‘Come, Tim, lad, let’s hear it.’ Tim looked sheepish, tucked down his head, and said he couldn’t sing; but this encouraging invitation of the master’s was echoed all round the table. It was a conversational opportunity: everybody could say ‘Come, Tim’, – except Alick, who never relaxed into the frivolity of unnecessary speech. At last, Tim’s next neighbour, Ben Tholoway, began to give emphasis to his speech by nudges, at which Tim, growing rather savage, said, ‘Let me alooan, will ye? else I’ll ma’ ye sing a toon ye wonna like.’ A good-tempered waggoner’s patience has limits, and Tim was not to be urged further.

‘Well, then, David, ye’re the lad to sing,’ said Ben, willing to show that he was not discomfited by this check. ‘Sing “My loove’s a roos wi’out a thorn”.’[9]

The amatory David was a young man of an unconscious abstracted expression, which was due probably to a squint of superior intensity rather than to any mental characteristic; for he was not indifferent to Ben’s invitation, but blushed and laughed and rubbed his sleeve over his mouth in a way that was regarded as a

symptom of yielding. And for some time the company appeared to be much in earnest about the desire to hear David's song. But in vain. The lyrism of the evening was in the cellar at present, and was not to be drawn from that retreat just yet.

Meanwhile the conversation at the head of the table had taken a political turn. Mr Craig was not above talking politics occasionally, though he piqued himself rather on a wise insight than on specific information. He saw so far beyond the mere facts of a case, that really it was superfluous to know them.

'I'm no reader o' the paper myself,' he observed to-night, as he filled his pipe, 'though I might read it fast enough if I liked, for there's Miss Lyddy has 'em, and 's done with 'em i' no time; but there's Mills, now, sits i' the chimney-corner and reads the paper pretty nigh from morning to night, and when he's got to th' end on't he's more addleheaded than he was at the beginning. He's full o' this peace now, as they talk on; he's been reading and reading, and thinks he's got to the bottom on't. "Why, Lor' bless you, Mills," says I, "you see no more into this thing nor you can see into the middle of a potato. I'll tell you what it is: you think it'll be a fine thing for the country; and I'm not again' it — mark my words — I'm not again' it. But it's my opinion as there's them at th' head o' this country as are worse enemies to us nor Bony and all the mounseers he's got at's back; for as for the mounseers, you may skewer half-a-dozen of 'em at once as if they war frogs."'[10]

'Ay, ay,' said Martin Poyser, listening with an air of much intelligence and edification, 'they Ne'er ate a bit o' beef i' their lives. Mostly sallet,[11]1 reckon.'

'And says I to Mills,' continued Mr Craig, ' "Will *you* try to make me believe as furriners[12] like them can do us half th' harm them ministers do with their bad government? If King George 'ud turn 'em all away and govern by himself, he'd see everything righted. He might take on Billy Pitt[13] again if he liked; but I don't see myself what we want wi' anybody besides King and Parliament. It's that nest o' ministers does the mischief, I tell you."'

'Ah, it's fine talking,' observed Mrs Poyser, who was now seated near her husband, with Totty on her lap — 'it's fine talking. It's hard work to tell which is Old Harry when everybody's got boots on.'[14]

'As for this peace,' said Mr Poyser, turning his head on one side in a dubitative manner, and giving a precautionary puff to his pipe between each sentence, 'I don't know. Th' war's a fine thing for the country, an' how'll you keep up prices wi'out it? An' them French are a wicked sort o' folks, by what I can make out; what can you do better nor fight 'em?'

'Ye're partly right there, Poyser,' said Mr Craig, 'but I'm not again' the peace — to make a holiday for a bit. We can break it when we like, an' *I'm* in no fear o' Bony, for all they talk so much o' his cliverness. That's what I says to Mills this morning. Lor' bless you, he sees no more through Bony!… why, I put him up to more in three minutes than he gets from 's paper all the year round. Says I, "Am I a gardener as knows his business, or aren't I, Mills? answer me that." "To be sure y' are, Craig," says he — he's not a bad fellow, Mills isn't, for a butler, but weak i' the head. "Well," says I, "you talk o' Bony's cliverness; would it be any use my being a first-rate gardener if I'd got nought but a quagmire to work on?" "No," says he. "Well," I says, "that's just what it is wi' Bony. I'll not deny but he may be a bit cliver — he's no Frenchman born,[15] as I understand; but what's he got at's back but mounseers?"'

Mr Craig paused a moment with an emphatic stare after this triumphant specimen of Socratic argument, and then added, thumping the table rather fiercely –

'Why, it's a sure thing — and there's them 'ull bear witness to't — as i' one regiment where there was one man a-missing, they put the regimentals on a big monkey, and they fit him as the shell fits the walnut, and you couldn't tell the monkey from the mounseers!'

'Ah! think o' that now!' said Mr Poyser, impressed at once with the political bearings of the fact, and with its striking interest as an anocdote in natural history.

'Come, Craig,' said Adam, 'that's a little too strong. You don't believe that. It's all nonsense about the French being such poor sticks. Mr Irwine's seen 'em in their own country, and he says they've plenty o' fine fellows among 'em. And as for knowledge, and contrivances, and manufactures, there's a many things as we're a fine sight behind 'em in. It's poor foolishness to run down your enemies. Why, Nelson and the rest of 'em 'ud have no merit i' beating 'em, if they were such offal as folks pretend.'

Mr Poyser looked doubtfully at Mr Craig, puzzled by this opposition of authorities. Mr Irwine's testimony was not to be disputed; but, on the other hand, Craig was a knowing fellow, and his view was less startling. Martin had never 'heard tell' of the French being good for much. Mr Craig had found no answer but such as was implied in taking a long draught of ale, and then looking down fixedly at the proportions of his own leg, which he turned a little outward for that purpose, when Bartle Massey returned from the fireplace, where he had been smoking his first pipe in quiet, and broke the silence by saying, as he thrust his forefinger into the canister[16] –

‘Why, Adam, how happened you not to be at church on Sunday? answer me that, you rascal. The anthem went limping without you. Are you going to disgrace your schoolmaster in his old age?’

‘No, Mr Massey,’ said Adam. ‘Mr and Mrs Poyser can tell you where I was. I was in no bad company.’

‘She’s gone, Adam — gone to Snowfield,’ said Mr Poyser, reminded of Dinah for the first time this evening. ‘I thought you’d ha’ persuaded her better. Nought ’ud hold her, but she must go yesterday forenoon. The missis has hardly got over it. I thought she’d ha’ no sperrit for the harvest supper.’

Mrs Poyser had thought of Dinah several times since Adam had come in, but she had had ‘no heart’ to mention the bad news.

‘What!’ said Bartle, with an air of disgust. ‘Was there a woman concerned? Then I give you up, Adam.’

‘But it’s a woman you’n spoke well on, Bartle,’ said Mr Poyser. ‘Come, now, you canna draw back; you said once as women wouldna ha’ been a bad invention if they’d all been like Dinah.’

‘I meant her voice, man — I meant her voice, that was all,’ said Bartle. ‘I can bear to hear her speak without wanting to put wool in my ears. As for other things, I daresay she’s like the rest o’ the women — thinks two and two ’ull come to make five, if she cries and bothers enough about it.’

‘Ay, ay!’ said Mrs Poyser; ‘one ’ud think, an’ hear some folks talk, as the men war ’cute enough to count the corns in a bag o’ wheat wi’ only smelling at it. They can see through a barn-door, *they* can. Perhaps that’s the reason they can see so little o’ this side on’t.’

Martin Poyser shook with delighted laughter, and winked at Adam, as much as to say the schoolmaster was in for it now.

‘Ah!’ said Bartle, sneeringly, ‘the women are quick enough – they’re quick enough. They know the rights of a story before they hear it, and can tell a man what his thoughts are before he knows ’em himself.’

‘Like enough,’ said Mrs Poyser; ‘for the men are mostly so slow, their thoughts overrun ’em, an’ they can only catch ’em by the tail. I can count a stocking-top while a man’s getting’s tongue ready; an’ when he outs wi’ his speech at last, there’s little broth to be made on’t. It’s your dead chicks take the longest hatchin’. Howiver, I’m not denyin’ the women are foolish: God Almighty made ’em to match the men.’

‘Match!’ said Bartle; ‘ay, as vinegar matches one’s teeth. If a man says a word, his wife ’11 match it with a contradiction; if he’s a mind for hot meat, his wife ’11 match it with cold bacon; if he laughs, she’ll match him with whimpering. She’s such a match as the horse-fly is to th’ horse: she’s got the right venom to sting him with — the right venom to sting him with.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Poyser, ‘I know what the men like — a poor soft, as ’ud simper at ’em like the pictur o’ the sun, whether they did right or wrong, an’ say thank you for a kick, an’ pretend she didna know which end she stood uppermost, till her husband told her. That’s what a man wants in a wife, mostly; he wants to make sure o’ one fool as ’ull tell him he’s wise. But there’s some men can do wi’out that — they think so much o’ themselves a’ready; an’ that’s how it is there’s old bachelors.’

‘Come, Craig,’ said Mr Poyser, jocosely, ‘you mun get married pretty quick, else you’ll be set down for an old bachelor; an’ you see what the women ’ull think on you.’

‘Well,’ said Mr Craig, willing to conciliate Mrs Poyser, and setting a high value on his own compliments, ‘*I* like a cleverish woman — a woman o’ sperrit — a managing woman.’

‘You’re out there, Craig,’ said Bartle, dryly; ‘you’re out there. You judge o’ your garden-stuff on a better plan than that: you pick the things for what they can excel in — for what they can excel in. You don’t value your peas for their roots, or your carrots for their flowers. Now, that’s the way you should choose women: their cleverness ’11 never come to much — never come to much; but they make excellent simpletons, ripe and strong-flavoured.’

‘What dost say to that?’ said Mr Poyser, throwing himself back and looking merrily at his wife.

‘Say!’ answered Mrs Poyser, with dangerous fire kindling in her eye; ‘why, I say as some folks’ tongues are like the clocks as run on strikin’, not to tell you the time o’ the day, but because there’s summat wrong i’ their own inside’…

Mrs Poyser would probably have brought her rejoinder to a further climax, if every one’s attention had not at this moment been called to the other end of the table, where the lyrism, which had at first only manifested itself by David’s *sotto voce* performance of ‘My love’s a rose without a thorn’, had gradually assumed a rather deafening and complex character. Tim, thinking slightly of David’s vocalization, was impelled to supersede that feeble buzz by a spirited commencement of ‘Three Merry Mowers’;[17] but David was not to be put down so easily, and showed himself capable of a copious crescendo, which was rendering it doubtful whether the rose would not predominate over the mowers, when old Kester, with an entirely unmoved and immovable aspect, suddenly set up a quavering treble, – as if he had been an alarum, and the time was come for him to go off.

The company at Alick’s end of the table took this form of vocal entertainment very much as a matter of

course, being free from musical prejudices; but Bartle Massey laid down his pipe and put his fingers in his ears; and Adam, who had been longing to go, ever since he had heard Dinah was not in the house, rose and said he must bid good-night.

'I'll go with you, lad,' said Bartle; 'I'll go with you before my ears are split.'

'I'll go round by the Common, and see you home, if you like, Mr Massey,' said Adam.

'Ay, ay!' said Bartle; 'then we can have a bit o' talk together. I never get hold of you now.'

'Eh! it's a pity but you'd sit it out,' said Martin Poyser. 'They'll all go soon; for th' missus niver lets 'em stay past ten.'

But Adam was resolute, so the good-nights were said, and the two friends turned out on their starlight walk together.

'There's that poor fool, Vixen, whimpering for me at home,' said Bartle. 'I can never bring her here with me for fear she should be struck with Mrs Poyser's eye, and the poor bitch might go limping for ever after.'

'I've never any need to drive Gyp back,' said Adam, laughing. 'He always turns back of his own head when he finds out I'm coming here.'

'Ay, ay,' said Bartle. 'A terrible woman! — made of needles – made of needles. But I stick to Martin — I shall always stick to Martin. And he likes the needles, God help him! He's a cushion made on purpose for 'em.'

'But she's a downright good-natur'd woman, for all that,' said Adam, 'and as true as the daylight. She's a bit cross wi' the dogs when they offer to come in th' house, but if they depended on her, she'd take care and have 'em well fed. If her tongue's keen her heart's tender: I've seen that in times o' trouble. She's one o' those women as are better than their word.'

'Well, well,' said Bartle, 'I don't say th' apple isn't sound at the core; but it sets my teeth on edge — it sets my teeth on edge.'

CHAPTER LIV

The Meeting on the Hill

Adam understood Dinah's haste to go away, and drew hope rather than discouragement from it. She was fearful lest the strength of her feeling towards him should hinder her from waiting and listening faithfully for the ultimate guiding voice from within.

'I wish I'd asked her to write to me, though,' he thought. 'And yet even that might disturb her a bit, perhaps. She wants to be quite quiet in her old way for a while. And I've no right to be impatient and interrupting her with my wishes. She's told me what her mind is; and she's not a woman to say one thing and mean another. I'll wait patiently.'

That was Adam's wise resolution, and it throve excellently for the first two or three weeks on the nourishment it got from the remembrance of Dinah's confession that Sunday afternoon. There is a wonderful amount of sustenance in the first few words of love. But towards the middle of October the resolution began to dwindle perceptibly, and showed dangerous symptoms of exhaustion. The weeks were unusually long: Dinah must surely have had more than enough time to make up her mind. Let a woman say what she will after she has once told a man that she loves him, he is a little too flushed and exalted with that first draught she offers him to care much about the taste of the second: he treads the earth with a very elastic step as he walks away from her, and makes light of all difficulties. But that sort of glow dies out: memory gets sadly diluted with time, and is not strong enough to revive us. Adam was no longer so confident as he had been: he began to fear that perhaps Dinah's old life would have too strong a grasp upon her for any new feeling to triumph. If she had not felt this, she would surely have written to him to give him some comfort; but it appeared that she held it right to discourage him. As Adam's confidence waned, his patience waned with it, and he thought he must write himself; he must ask Dinah not to leave him in painful doubt longer than was needful. He sat up late one night to write her a letter, but the next morning he burnt it, afraid of its effect. It would be worse to have a discouraging answer by letter than from her own lips, for her presence reconciled him to her will.

You perceive how it was: Adam was hungering for the sight of Dinah; and when that sort of hunger reaches a certain stage, a lover is likely to still it though he may have to put his future in pawn.

But what harm could he do by going to Snowfield? Dinah could not be displeased with him for it: she had not forbidden him to go: she must surely expect that he would go before long. By the second Sunday in October this view of the case had become so clear to Adam, that he was already on his way to Snowfield; on horseback this time, for his hours were precious now, and he had borrowed Jonathan Burge's good nag for the journey.

What keen memories went along the road with him! He had often been to Oakbourne and back since that first journey to Snowfield, but beyond Oakbourne the grey stone walls, the broken country, the meagre trees, seemed to be telling him afresh the story of that painful past which he knew so well by heart. But no story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather, we who read it are no longer the same interpreters: and Adam this morning brought with him new thoughts through that grey country — thoughts which gave an altered significance to its story of the past.

That is a base and selfish, even a blasphemous, spirit, which rejoices and is thankful over the past evil that has blighted or crushed another, because it has been made a source of unforeseen good to ourselves: Adam could never cease to mourn over that mystery of human sorrow which had been brought so close to him: he could never thank God for another's misery. And if I were capable of that narrow-sighted joy in Adam's behalf, I should still know he was not the man to feel it for himself: he would have shaken his head at such a sentiment, and said, 'Evil's evil, and sorrow's sorrow, and you can't alter its natur by wrapping it up in other words. Other folks were not created for my sake, that I should think all square when things turn out well for me.'

But it is not ignoble to feel that the fuller life which a sad experience has brought us is worth our own personal share of pain: surely it is not possible to feel otherwise, any more than it would be possible for a man with a cataract to regret the painful process by which his dim blurred sight of men as trees walking had been exchanged for clear outline[1] and effulgent day. The growth of higher feeling within us is like the

growth of faculty, bringing with it a sense of added strength: we can no more wish to return to a narrower sympathy, than a painter or a musician can wish to return to his cruder manner, or a philosopher to his less complete formula.

Something like this sense of enlarged being was in Adam's mind this Sunday morning as he rode along in vivid recollection of the past. His feeling towards Dinah, the hope of passing his life with her, had been the distant unseen point towards which that hard journey from Snowfield eighteen months ago had been leading him. Tender and deep as his love for Hetty had been — so deep that the roots of it would never be torn away — his love for Dinah was better and more precious to him; for it was the outgrowth of that fuller life which had come to him from his acquaintance with deep sorrow. 'It's like as if it was a new strength to me,' he said to himself, 'to love her, and know as she loves me. I shall look t' her to help me to see things right. For she's better than I am — there's less o' self in her, and pride. And it's a feeling as gives you a sort o' liberty, as if you could walk more fearless, when you've more trust in another than y' have in yourself. I've always been thinking I knew better than them as belonged to me, and that's a poor sort o' life, when you can't look to them nearest to you t' help you with a bit better thought than what you've got inside you a'ready.'

It was more than two o'clock in the afternoon when Adam came in sight of the grey town on the hill-side, and looked searchingly towards the green valley below, for the first glimpse of the old thatched roof near the ugly red mill. The scene looked less harsh in the soft October sunshine than it had done in the eager time of early spring; and the one grand charm it possessed in common with all wide-stretching woodless regions — that it filled you with a new consciousness of the overarching sky – had a milder, more soothing influence than usual, on this almost cloudless day. Adam's doubts and fears melted under this influence as the delicate web-like clouds had gradually melted away into the clear blue above him. He seemed to see Dinah's gentle face assuring him, with its looks alone, of all he longed to know.

He did not expect Dinah to be at home at this hour, but he got down from his horse and tied it at the little gate, that he might ask where she was gone to-day. He had set his mind on following her and bringing her home. She was gone to Sloman's End, a hamlet about three miles off, over the hill, the old woman told him: had set off directly after morning chapel, to preach in a cottage there, as her habit was. Anybody at the town would tell him the way to Sloman's End. So Adam got on his horse again and rode to the town, putting up at the old inn, and taking a hasty dinner there in the company of the too chatty landlord, from whose friendly questions and reminiscences he was glad to escape as soon as possible, and set out towards Sloman's End. With all his haste, it was nearly four o'clock before he could set off, and he thought that as Dinah had gone so early, she would perhaps already be near returning. The little, grey, desolate-looking hamlet, unscreened by sheltering trees, lay in sight long before he reached it; and as he came near he could hear the sound of voices singing a hymn. 'Perhaps that's the last hymn before they come away,' Adam thought: 'I'll walk back a bit, and turn again to meet her, further off the village.' He walked back till he got nearly to the top of the hill again, and seated himself on a loose stone, against the low wall, to watch till he should see the little black figure leaving the hamlet and winding up the hill. He chose this spot, almost at the top of the hill, because it was away from all eyes — no house, no cattle, not even a nibbling sheep near — no presence but the still lights and shadows, and the great embracing sky.

She was much longer coming than he expected: he waited an hour at least watching for her and thinking of her, while the afternoon shadows lengthened, and the light grew softer. At last he saw the little black figure coming from between the grey houses, and gradually approaching the foot of the hill. Slowly, Adam thought; but Dinah was really walking at her usual pace, with a light quiet step. Now she was beginning to wind along the path up the hill, but Adam would not move yet: he would not meet her too soon; he had set his heart on meeting her in this assured loneliness. And now he began to fear lest he should startle her too much; 'Yet,' he thought, 'she's not one to be overstartled; she's always so calm and quiet, as if she was prepared for anything.'

What was she thinking of as she wound up the hill? Perhaps she had found complete repose without him, and had ceased to feel any need of his love. On the verge of a decision we all tremble: hope pauses with fluttering wings.

But now at last she was very near, and Adam rose from the stone wall. It happened that just as he walked forward, Dinah had paused and turned round to look back at the village: who does not pause and look back in mounting a hill? Adam was glad; for, with the fine instinct of a lover, he felt that it would be best for her to hear his voice before she saw him. He came within three paces of her and then said, 'Dinah!' She started without looking round, as if she connected the sound with no place. 'Dinah!' Adam said again. He knew quite well what was in her mind. She was so accustomed to think of impressions as purely spiritual monitions, that she looked for no material visible accompaniment of the voice.

But this second time she looked round. What a look of yearning love it was that the mild grey eyes turned

on the strong dark-eyed man! She did not start again at the sight of him; she said nothing, but moved towards him so that his arm could clasp her round.

And they walked on so in silence, while the warm tears fell. Adam was content, and said nothing. It was Dinah who spoke first.

‘Adam,’ she said, ‘it is the Divine Will. My soul is so knit to yours that it is but a divided life I live without you. And this moment, now you are with me, and I feel that our hearts are filled with the same love, I have a fulness of strength to bear and do our heavenly Father’s Will, that I had lost before.’

Adam paused and looked into her sincere eyes.

‘Then we’ll never part any more, Dinah, till death parts us.’[2]

And they kissed each other with a deep joy.

What greater thing is there for two human souls, than to feel that they are joined for life — to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting?

CHAPTER LV

Marriage Bells

In little more than a month after that meeting on the hill — on a rimy morning in departing November — Adam and Dinah were married.

It was an event much thought of in the village. All Mr Burge's men had a holiday, and all Mr Poyser's; and most of those who had a holiday appeared in their best clothes at the wedding. I think there was hardly an inhabitant of Hayslope specially mentioned in this history and still resident in the parish on this November morning, who was not either in church to see Adam and Dinah married, or near the church door to greet them as they came forth. Mrs Irwine and her daughters were waiting at the churchyard gates in their carriage (for they had a carriage now) to shake hands with the bride and bridegroom, and wish them well; and in the absence of Miss Lydia Donnithorne at Bath, Mrs Best, Mr Mills, and Mr Craig had felt it incumbent on them to represent 'the family' at the Chase on the occasion. The churchyard walk was quite lined with familiar faces, many of them faces that had first looked at Dinah when she preached on the Green; and no wonder they showed this eager interest on her marriage morning, for nothing like Dinah and the history which had brought her and Adam Bede together had been known at Hayslope within the memory of man.

Bessy Cranage, in her neatest cap and frock, was crying, though she did not exactly know why; for, as her cousin Wiry Ben, who stood near her, judiciously suggested, Dinah was not going away, and if Bessy was in low spirits, the best thing for her to do was to follow Dinah's example, and marry an honest fellow who was ready to have her. Next to Bessy, just within the church door, there were the Poyser children, peeping round the corner of the pews to get a sight of the mysterious ceremony; Totty's face wearing an unusual air of anxiety at the idea of seeing cousin Dinah come back looking rather old, for in Totty's experience no married people were young.

I envy them all the sight they had when the marriage was fairly ended and Adam led Dinah out of church. She was not in black this morning; for her aunt Poyser would by no means allow such a risk of incurring bad luck, and had herself made a present of the wedding dress, made all of grey, though in the usual Quaker form, for on this point Dinah could not give way. So the lily face looked out with sweet gravity from under a grey Quaker bonnet, neither smiling nor blushing, but with lips trembling a little under the weight of solemn feelings. Adam, as he pressed her arm to his side, walked with his old erectness and his head thrown rather backward as if to face all the world better; but it was not because he was particularly proud this morning, as is the wont of bridegrooms, for his happiness was of a kind that had little reference to men's opinion of it. There was a tinge of sadness in his deep joy; Dinah knew it, and did not feel aggrieved.

There were three other couples, following the bride and bridegroom: first, Martin Poyser, looking as cheery as a bright fire on this rimy morning, led quiet Mary Bürge, the bridesmaid; then came Seth, serenely happy, with Mrs Poyser on his arm; and last of all Bartle Massey, with Lisbeth — Lisbeth in a new gown and bonnet, too busy with her pride in her son, and her delight in possessing the one daughter she had desired, to devise a single pretext for complaint.

Bartle Massey had consented to attend the wedding at Adam's earnest request, under protest against marriage in general, and the marriage of a sensible man in particular. Nevertheless, Mr Poyser had a joke against him after the wedding dinner, to the effect that in the vestry he had given the bride one more kiss than was necessary.

Behind this last couple came Mr Irwine, glad at heart over this good morning's work of joining Adam and Dinah. For he had seen Adam in the worst moments of his sorrow; and what better harvest from that painful seed-time could there be than this? The love that had brought hope and comfort in the hour of despair, the love that had found its way to the dark prison cell and to poor Hetty's darker soul — this strong, gentle love was to be Adam's companion and helper till death.

There was much shaking of hands mingled with 'God bless you's', and other good wishes to the four couples, at the churchyard gate, Mr Poyser answering for the rest with unwonted vivacity of tongue, for he had all the appropriate wedding-day jokes at his command. And the women, he observed, could never do

anything but put finger in eye at a wedding. Even Mrs Poyser could not trust herself to speak as the neighbours shook hands with her; and Lisbeth began to cry in the face of the very first person who told her she was getting young again.

Mr Joshua Rann, having a slight touch of rheumatism, did not join in the ringing of the bells this morning, and, looking on with some contempt at these informal greetings which required no official co-operation from the clerk, began to hum in his musical bass, 'Oh what a joyful thing it is', by way of preluding a little to the effect he intended to produce in the wedding psalm[1] next Sunday.

'That's a bit of good news to cheer Arthur,' said Mr Irwine to his mother, as they drove off. 'I shall write to him the first thing when we get home.'

EPILOGUE

It is near the end of June, in 1807. The workshops have been shut up half an hour or more in Adam Bede's timber-yard, which used to be Jonathan Burge's, and the mellow evening light is falling on the pleasant house with the buff walls and the soft grey thatch, very much as it did when we saw Adam bringing in the keys on that June evening nine years ago.

There is a figure we know well, just come out of the house, and shading her eyes with her hands as she looks for something in the distance; for the rays that fall on her white borderless cap and her pale auburn hair are very dazzling. But now she turns away from the sunlight and looks towards the door. We can see the sweet pale face quite well now: it is scarcely at all altered — only a little fuller, to correspond to her more matronly figure, which still seems light and active enough in the plain black dress.

'I see him, Seth,' Dinah said, as she looked into the house. 'Let us go and meet him. Come, Lisbeth, come with mother.'

The last call was answered immediately by a small fair creature with pale auburn hair and grey eyes, little more than four years old, who ran out silently and put her hand into her mother's.

'Come, uncle Seth,' said Dinah.

'Ay, ay, we're coming,' Seth answered from within, and presently appeared stooping under the doorway, being taller than usual by the black head of a sturdy two-year-old nephew, who had caused some delay by demanding to be carried on uncle's shoulder.

'Better take him on thy arm, Seth,' said Dinah, looking fondly at the stout black-eyed fellow. 'He's troublesome to thee so.'

'Nay, nay: Addy likes a ride on my shoulder. I can carry him so for a bit.' A kindness which young Addy acknowledged by drumming his heels with promising force against uncle Seth's chest. But to walk by Dinah's side, and be tyrannized over by Dinah's and Adam's children, was uncle Seth's earthly happiness.

'Where didst see him?' asked Seth, as they walked on into the adjoining field. 'I can't catch sight of him anywhere.'

'Between the hedges by the roadside,' said Dinah. 'I saw his hat and his shoulder. There he is again.'

'Trust thee for catching sight of him if he's anywhere to be seen,' said Seth, smiling. 'Thee't like poor mother used to be. She was always on the look-out for Adam, and could see him sooner than other folks, for all her eyes got dim.'

'He's been longer than he expected,' said Dinah, taking Arthur's watch from a small side-pocket and looking at it; 'it's nigh upon seven now.'

'Ay, they'd have a deal to say to one another,' said Seth, 'and the meeting'ud touch 'em both pretty closish. Why, it's getting on towards eight years since they parted.'

'Yes,' said Dinah, 'Adam was greatly moved this morning at the thought of the change he should see in the poor young man, from the sickness he has undergone, as well as the years which have changed us all. And the death of the poor wanderer, when she was coming back to us, has been sorrow upon sorrow.'

'See, Addy,' said Seth, lowering the young one to his arm now, and pointing, 'there's father coming — at the far stile.'

Dinah hastened her steps, and little Lisbeth ran on at her utmost speed till she clasped her father's leg. Adam patted her head and lifted her up to kiss her, but Dinah could see the marks of agitation on his face as she approached him, and he put her arm within his in silence.

'Well, youngster, must I take you?' he said, trying to smile, when Addy stretched out his arms — ready, with the usual baseness of infancy, to give up his uncle Seth at once, now there was some rarer patronage at haud.

'It's cut me a good deal, Dinah,' Adam said at last, when they were walking on.

'Didst find him greatly altered?' said Dinah.

'Why, he's altered and yet not altered. I should ha' known him anywhere. But his colour's changed, and he looks sadly. However, the doctors say he'll soon be set right in his own country air. He's all sound in th' inside; it's only the fever shattered him so. But he speaks just the same, and smiles at me just as he did when he was a lad. It's wonderful how he's always had just the same sort o' look when he smiles.'

'I've never seen him smile, poor young man,' said Dinah.

'But thee *wilt* see him smile, to-morrow,' said Adam. 'He asked after thee the first thing when he began to come round, and we could talk to one another. "I hope she isn't altered," he said, "I remember her face so well." I told him, "no,"' Adam continued, looking fondly at the eyes that were turned up towards his, 'only

a bit plumper, as thee'dst a right to be after seven year. "I may come and see her to-morrow, mayn't I?" he said; "I long to tell her how I've thought of her all these years."'

'Didst tell him I'd always used the watch?' said Dinah.

'Ay; and we talked a deal about thee, for he says he never saw a woman a bit like thee. "I shall turn Methodist some day," he said, "when she preaches out of doors, and go to hear her." And I said, "Nay, sir, you can't do that, for Conference has forbid the women preaching,[1] and she's given it up, all but talking to the people a bit in their houses."'

'Ah,' said Seth, who could not repress a comment on this point, 'and a sore pity it was o' Conference; and if Dinah had seen as I did, we'd ha' left the Wesleyans and joined a body that 'ud put no bonds on Christian liberty.'

'Nay, lad, nay,' said Adam, 'she was right and thee wast wrong. There's no rule so wise but what it's a pity for somebody or other. Most o' the women do more harm nor good with their preaching — they've not got Dinah's gift nor her sperrit; and she's seen that, and she thought it right to set th' example o' submitting, for she's not held from other sorts o' teaching. And I agree with her, and approve o' what she did.'

Seth was silent. This was a standing subject of difference rarely alluded to, and Dinah, wishing to quit it at once, said –

'Didst remember, Adam, to speak to Colonel Donnithorne the words my uncle and aunt intrusted to thee?'

'Yes, and he's going to the Hall Farm with Mr Irwine the day after to-morrow. Mr Irwine came in while we were talking about it, and he would have it as the Colonel must see nobody but thee to-morrow: he said — and he's in the right of it — as it'll be bad for him t' have his feelings stirred with seeing many people one after another. "We must get you strong and hearty," he said, "that's the first thing to be done, Arthur, and then you shall have your own way. But I shall keep you under your old tutor's thumb till then." Mr Irwine's fine and joyful at having him home again.'

Adam was silent a little while, and then said –

'It was very cutting when we first saw one another. He'd never heard about poor Hetty till Mr Irwine met him in London, for the letters missed him on his journey. The first thing he said to me, when we'd got hold o' one another's hands, was, "I could never do anything for her, Adam — she lived long enough for all the suffering — and I'd thought so of the time when I might do something for her. But you told me the truth when you said to me once, 'There's a sort of wrong that can never be made up for.'"'

'Why, there's Mr and Mrs Poyser coming in at the yard gate,' said Seth.

'So there is,' said Dinah. 'Run, Lisbeth, run to meet aunt Poyser. Come in, Adam, and rest; it has been a hard day for thee.'

THE END

Appendix I
George Eliot's History of *Adam Bede*

George Eliot wrote these notes on 'The History of Adam Bede' in her journal, 30 November 1858. It was printed by J. W. Cross in his *George Eliot's Life* (1885, vol. II, pp. 65–71) and is reprinted here, with the kind permission of Yale University Press, from Gordon S. Haight's *Letters,* II, pp. 502–5.

History of 'Adam Bede'

The germ of 'Adam Bede' was an anecdote told me by my Methodist Aunt Samuel (the wife of my Father's younger brother): an anecdote from her own experience. We were sitting together one afternoon during her visit to me at Griffe, probably in 1839 or 40,[1] when it occurred to her to tell me how she had visited a condemned criminal, a very ignorant girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess — how she had stayed with her praying, through the night and how the poor creature at last broke out into tears, and confessed her crime. My Aunt afterwards went with her in the cart to the place of execution, and she described to me the great respect with which this ministry of hers was regarded by the official people about the gaol. The story, told by my aunt with great feeling, affected me deeply, and I never lost the impression of that afternoon and our talk together; but I believe I never mentioned it, through all the intervening years, till something prompted me to tell it to George in December 1856, when I had begun to write the 'Scenes of Clerical Life.' He remarked that the scene in the prison would make a fine element in a story, and I afterwards began to think of blending this and some other recollections of my aunt in one story with some points in my father's early life and character. The problem of construction that remained was to make the unhappy girl one of the chief *dramatis personae* and connect her with the hero. At first I thought of making the story one of the series of 'Scenes,' but afterwards, when several motives had induced me to close these with 'Janet's Repentance,' I determined on making what we always called in our conversations 'My Aunt's Story,' the subject of a long novel: which I accordingly began to write on the 22d October 1857.

The character of Dinah grew out of my recollections of my aunt, but Dinah is not at all like my aunt, who was a very small, black-eyed woman, and (as I was told, for I never heard her preach) very vehement in her style of preaching. She had left off preaching when I knew her, being, probably, sixty years old, and in delicate health; and she had become, as my father told me, much more gentle and subdued than she had been in the days of her active ministry and bodily strength, when she could not rest without exhorting and remonstrating in season and out of season. I was very fond of her, and enjoyed the few weeks of her stay with me greatly. She was loving and kind to me, and I could talk to her about my inward life, which was closely shut up from those usually round me. I saw her only twice again, for much shorter periods: once at her own home at Wirksworth in Derbyshire,[2] and once at my Father's last residence, Foleshill.[3]

The character of Adam, and one or two incidents connected with him were suggested by my Father's early life; but Adam is not my father any more than Dinah is my aunt. Indeed, there is not a single *portrait* in 'Adam Bede'; only the suggestions of experience wrought up into new combinations. When I began to write it, the only elements I had determined on besides the character of Dinah were the character of Adam, his relation to Arthur Donnithorne and their mutual relation to Hetty, i.e. to the girl who commits child-murder: the scene in the prison being of course the climax towards which I worked. Everything else grew out of the characters and their mutual relations. Dinah's ultimate relation to Adam was suggested by George, when I had read to him the first part of the first volume: he was so delighted with the presentation of Dinah and so convinced that the readers' interest would centre in her, that he wanted her to be the principal figure at the last. I accepted the idea at once, and from the end of the third chapter worked with it constantly in view.

The first volume was written at Richmond and given to Blackwood in March. He expressed great admiration of its freshness and vividness, but seemed to hesitate about putting it in the Magazine, which was the form of publication he, as well as myself, had previously contemplated. He still *wished* to have it for the Mag., but desired to know the course of the story; at *present,* he saw nothing to prevent its reception in Maga, but he would like to see more. I am uncertain whether his doubts rested solely on Hetty's relation to Arthur, or whether they were also directed towards the treatment of Methodism by the Church. I refused to tell my story beforehand, on the ground that I would not have it judged apart from my *treatment,* which alone determines the moral quality of art; and ultimately I proposed that the notion of publication in Maga should be given up, and that the novel should be published in three volumes, at Christmas, if possible. He assented.

I began the second volume in the second week of my stay at Munich, about the middle of April. While we

were at Munich, George expressed his fear that Adam's part was too passive throughout the drama, and that it was important for him to be brought into more direct collision with Arthur. This doubt haunted me, and out of it grew the scene in the Wood between Arthur and Adam: the fight came to me as a *necessity* one night at the Munich opera when I was listening to *William Tell.*[4] Work was slow and interrupted at Munich, and when we left I had only written to the beginning of the dance on the Birthday Feast:[5] but at Dresden, I wrote <in quiet> uninterruptedly and with great enjoyment in the long, quiet mornings, and there I nearly finished the second volume — all, I think, but the last chapter, which I wrote here in the old room at Richmond in the first week of September, and then sent the M.S. off to Blackwood. The opening of the third volume — Hetty's journeys[6] — was, I think written more rapidly than the rest of the book, and was left without the slightest alteration of the first draught. Throughout the book, I have altered little, and the only cases, I think, in which George <has> suggested more than a verbal alteration, when I <have> read the M.S. aloud to him, <have been> were the first scene at the Farm and the scene in the Wood between Arthur and Adam,[7] both of which he recommended me to 'space out' a little, which I did.

When, on October 29,1 had written to the end of the love scene at the Farm, between Adam and Dinah, I sent the M.S. to Blackwood, since the remainder of the third volume could not affect the judgment passed on what had gone before. He wrote back in warm admiration, and offered me, on the part of the firm, £800 for four years' copyright. I accepted the offer. The last words of the third volume were written and dispatched on their way to Edinburgh November the 16th, and now on this last day of the same month I have written this slight history of my book. I love it very much and am deeply thankful to have written it, whatever the public may say to it — a result which is still in darkness, for I have at present had only four sheets of the proof. The book would have been published at Christmas, or rather, early in December, but that Bulwer's 'What will he do with it?' was to be published by Blackwoods at that time, and it was thought that this novel might interfere with mine.

8 Park Shot, Richmond. | November 30. 1858.

Appendix II
Contemporary Broadsheets on Mary Voce

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AN ACCOUNT OF THE Experience and Happy Death of *Mary Voce,*

Who was EXECUTED on NOTTINGHAM GALLOWS, on TUESDAY, March 16, 1802, for the MURDER OF HER OWN CHILD.

JOHN CLARKE, Miss Richards, and a few other serious friends visited her repeatedly for several weeks before her trial, explaining the plan of salvation, praying with her, and exhorting her to confess her sins and earnestly seek the Lord; but it does not appear that she was deeply awakened to a proper sense of her dangerous and lost situation by nature and practice, till early on Saturday morning last. On Friday after her condemnation, though in the most agonizing distress, she remained as hardened and impenitent as ever, persisting in denying her guilt, (and as she afterwards told us) determined to destroy herself if possible; it is evident that all the anguish she experienced on Friday was merely worldly sorrow, but very early on Saturday morning her conscience was truly awakened, and she declared she was *now* convinced that Hell must be her portion, unless she both confessed her guilt and obtained pardon through Jesus Christ. About two o'clock the same morning she confessed the Murder, but remained still much distressed with a load of guilt on her soul, for she became very sensible that she was under the condemnation of the law of God; all that forenoon she manifested real penitence and earnestly sought the Lord, but in the afternoon, her distress on account of her sins increased very much; she frequently said, she had such a weight of guilt upon her soul, that she thought her heart would certainly break, exclaiming, Oh, my heart will break! my heart will break! The danger of her final condemnation appeared to her so great, that she repeatedly declared, she feared she must after all go to Hell, that she thought the very Devil had the possession of her, for she saw it was quite necessary to give up the man with whom she had been wickedly connected, but felt unable to do it, till a very little time before the Lord graciously set her soul at liberty. About five o'clock her mind was much softened, and she freely and fully confessed with real penitential contrition of soul all the sins she recollected being guilty off, continuing in earnest agonizing prayer to God for mercy. Miss UNWIN and Miss RICHARDS were shortly after engaged in prayer imploring the mercy of God in her behalf, when she suddenly stopped them, by exclaiming in a surprise of gratitude and joy, 'Oh, what has the Lord done for me!' On being asked what he had done for her, she replied, 'He has forgiven me all my sins, I feel it in my heart!' Her load of guilt and misery was instantly gone, peace and resignation flowed into her happy soul! She immediately exclaimed, 'How happy I am, I don't wonder at your taking such pains with me, if you feel as happy as I do, I could not have thought it possible, what happy lives you must live! Shortly after, when JOHN CLARKE, Miss RICHARDS, and ELIZABETH TOMLINSON were at prayer with her, she felt the evidence of her pardon much clearer, her consolation was amazingly increased, she never after felt any doubt, nor the least degree of the fear of death.

After she found peace, her sins appeared in their true light, and she repeatedly declared that hanging was too good for her, she deserved Hell. She felt she not only forgave but loved her enemies, and often assured us that she had *now* rather die than live. She observed that her imprisonment was the best thing that ever happened to her. Before her soul was set at liberty, she was much concerned at the thought of being made such a public spectacle, but ever after, all shame was banished from her mind. She could scarcely take any nourishment after her condemnation, till she experienced the pardoning love of God, but afterwards could take her food, and sleep, as usual. She frequently said that God loved her, and she felt she loved him. The prison was indeed a Bethel to all who had the privilege of visiting her. The few hours we were with her, were some of the happiest of our lives, she was *so* triumphant, so delivered from every degree of fear, so lost in wonder, love and praise, was such a proof that perfect love casteth out all fear that hath torment, that our grateful souls felt an increasing love to God for his goodness to her, and at the same time the most perfect union of spirit, and the most ardent Christian affection with her's. Mr Bonington very humanely requested JOHN CLARKE to prepare her mind for the entrance of the Sheriff, and his Officers, she immediately said, 'They might come forward, for she had no fear of death;' She met the Executioner with a smile, and gave him her hand, saying, when he asked her to forgive him, 'Bless you, I have nothing against you, somebody must do it,' and assisted him in placing the ropes. — She told them, that God had helped her to confess her sins, and that she was happy, that she knew the Lord had pardoned her, and that she was going to Heaven. Some of the gentlemen who had seen her on the Friday after her condemnation, remarked that they could not have conceived such a change could possibly have been effected: She took the most

affectionate leave of Mr Bonington's servant-maid and the female prisoners, embracing them all, and assuring them (although they all wept very much at parting with her) that she was so happy she could not weep, for she had rather die than live. On the road to the gallows she frequently said to Miss RICHARDS, ELIZ. TOMLINSON, and JOHN CLARKE, who at her request attended her in the cart to the place of execution, 'This is the best day I ever saw, I am quite happy, I had rather die than live,' and frequently uttered short ejaculatory sentences chiefly of praise to God; it seemed indeed that her prayer was almost all turned into praise. — On the road she observed, 'I am so happy, I cannot cry, I cannot shed one tear;' when the cart arrived at the fatal tree, Miss RICHARDS said to her, We are got there, Mary; 'Well,' she said, 'Bless the Lord,' with a triumphant and heavenly smile on her countenance.

After her condemnation our friends who visited her never left her, there were always at least two of the young women with her, which was certainly made an infinite blessing, and for which privilege, she very sensibly felt her obligation to the Sheriffs and Mr Bonington, often expressing her thankfulness on that account to those of us who were with her.

She desired the people at the gallows to take warning by her, and assured them that she was happy, and that she was confident she should be in Glory directly, observing, that indeed Glory had already begun in her happy soul.

After the cap was drawn over her face, while the Executioner was fastening the rope, she repeated her former exclamations of 'Glory! Glory to Jesus!' adding, 'I shall soon be in Glory, — Glory is indeed already begun in my soul, and the angels of God are about me!' which were her last words.

In the evening Mr KANE preached a sermon on the occasion, to a very crouded audience, in the Methodist Chapel, *Halifax Lane,* from these words, '*Is not this a Brand plucked from the fire?*'

HENRY TAFT.

Some things through haste were omitted in a few of the first copies which are here inserted.

Printed and Sold by C. SUTTON, Bridlesmith gate.

The Life, Character, Behaviour at the Place of Execution and Dying Speech of
MARY VOCE,

Who was Executed on Nottingham Gallows, on Tuesday the 16th of March, 1802,

For the Wilful Murder of Elizabeth Voce, her own Child.

AT the Lent Assizes for the Town of Nottingham, held on THURSDAY, March 11, 1802, before the Hon. Sir Robert Graham, Knt. one of the Barons of his Majesty's Court of Exchequer, MARY VOCE, aged 24, wife of----------Voce, bricklayer, was indicted for the wilful murder of her daughter, Elizabeth Voce, an infant, in the parish of St Mary, in the town of Nottingham, by administering a certain poisonous substance, called arsenic, mixed in water in a tea-cup, to the said Elizabeth Voce, of which she languished a few hours in extreme agony, and then expired.

This horrid act was perpetrated in November last, and the alledged causes came out in evidence at the trial, and more particularly in the under-mentioned voluntary Confession, which she desired might be published to the world, for the sake of deterring those unhappy married females from forming polluted connexions with other men, whose ways are ways of wickedness, and whose paths are paths of wretchedness. — Her Trial came on on Friday noon, March 12, which lasted nearly four hours; and it appeared that this unhappy creature had made several attempts to purchase the fatal drug before she could finally obtain it. The witnesses were clear and circumstantial in their evidence, as to the day and hour on which she purchased it, and the Judge, whose humanity on all occasions is so conspicuous, seeing no hope whereby he could put in a plea for her, asked if she had any thing to say in her defence? Upon this she produced a written paper, which being immediately handed to his Lordship, contained a refutation of the direct charge on which she stood indicted, saying that the poison was given by some of her neighbours' children to the child, through mistake, whilst she was absent in the yard a few minutes; that the child being thirsty, they had hastily taken the tea-cup from the hob, and given it to her, and that she had just swallowed the contents at the moment she (Mary Voce) returned into the house; that moreover, she did not deny buying the arsenic, but declared it was her solemn intention to destroy herself by taking it, in consequence of the long repeated ill usage she had sustained from her husband. This was the only circumstance which could be construed any ways favourable for her, and on which the Judge dwelt for the space of half an hour; but then she had no evidence to corroborate her declaration.

The Judge here recapitulated the evidence, coupled with the Prisoner's defence, and left it with the Jury to decide on the whole fact; observing, however, that possibly it might be true that she had bore with ill

treatment from her husband, and that her life might be rendered burthensome to her; but the motive and the cause for such treatment, was, alas! too apparent; she had embraced the allurements of infidelity, and unable to withstand the resentment of an injured husband, she says she had recourse to the dreadful expedient aforesaid; — 'it may be so,' said his Lordship, but there is no one who appears to substantiate this written document. She may have been constrained to destroy this child in revenge for the bad usage; and it is necessary to state, that her husband having left her, she had herself and infant to maintain by the labor of her own hands.

The Jury retired out of Court, and after a consultation of ten minutes, pronounced the Prisoner 'GUILTY of Wilful Murder.' The Judge immediately passed the awful Sentence of the Law, 'That she be hanged by the neck 'til she was dead, and that afterwards her body be given to the Surgeons to be dissected and anatomised;' which dreadful judgment the Prisoner heard with a tolerable degree of fortitude, if we except her eyes being suffused with tears. His Lordship and the whole Court were deeply affected, on beholding a woman, in the prime of life and comeliness of person, stand before God and her country, a guilty creature unworthy to live any longer in this world, and not sufficiently prepared to enter that of another, 'where the worm dyeth not.'

THE following account of her Birth and Parentage was received verbally from her own mouth, on the morning of her execution, and committed to writing by a friend:

'I MARY VOCE, was born at Snenton, near Nottingham, in the year 1778; my father and mother are both dead, and fortunate it is they are no more. My maiden name was Hallam; I wish it had been so still. I met with the man who took me for his wife, at———; there we were united by the spiritual law, but at Nottingham — O how I tremble while I speak it — at this place the dominion of Lust seized my soul, I quitted the protecting partner of my virgin heart, and rambling after new delights, became intoxicated with a succession of carnal pleasures; nor did I awake from my reverie, till my husband became so exasperated by my conduct, that he left me a prey to remorse. I had one child* by him, but I believe he suspected it was not his own, which gave rise to the most violent recriminations before he left me. Having torn himself from me, I thought of subsisting my child by batting cotton, and by other methods which it is too painful to relate.

'I came to dwell in Fishergate, and had work for some time; but that at length failing, I was at a loss how to act; to beg I was ashamed, to steal I did not like, though I could kill my child; — my husband sent me no money, in a fit of revenge I sought the deadly poison; with a view, at first, to destroy myself, but Satan, always watchful for our destruction, dictated to me the infernal spirit of murdering that sweet innocent, and prompted me to continue onwards in the wages of prostitution. I obeyed his mandates, and was undone. It was in vain I pleaded the excuse of Self-murder before the Judge and Jury, their penetrating minds knew better.

'One Wm. Jackson went with me to purchase the arsenic in Warser-gate; I wish he had persuaded me to the contrary, it might have been better for his conscience.

'I hope God will accept this my sincere repentance, and thro' the merits of Christ's blood, if my sins be as scarlet, yet they shall be as wool. This is a town full of vice and misery, many there be that sit in darkness and in the valley of death; yet the Gospel is preached unto them, and they awake not; may my fate, however, awake them.

'Lastly, I forgive those who have reflected on me. — I hope they will reflect on me no more after my decease. I have an affectionate sister who will weep at my sad exit; this is all I have to say.

'MARY VOCE.'

'Condemned Cell, Town-gaol, Nottingham, Monday night, March 15, 1802.'

The resident Clergymen have alternately visited her, both before and since condemnation, and have found her very desirous of prayer, and anxious to express her contrition. On Sunday night she felt quite comfortable and resigned, and asked the Ministers many questions relative to a future state, who assured her that Jesus will wait 'til the last hour to save to the uttermost all those who seek him by faith and repentance; at which she seemed greatly submissive and thankful.

The morning at length arrived when she was to bid adieu to the transactions of this world; at ten o'clock, the Undersheriff, with his posse of constables, arrived at the gaol to demand her body, and being seated backwards in the cart, was drawn to the place of execution amidst a crowd of spectators, where after being some time engaged in devotion, she was launched into that gulph 'whence no traveller returns.'

Her remains, after dissection, were publicly exposed.

Beware of buying those printed the day before her execution.

Burbage and Stretton, Printers.

A full and particular Account of the Life, Trial, and Behaviour of
MARY VOCE,

Who was EXECUTED on NOTTINGHAM GALLOWS, on TUESDAY March 16, 1802, for

Poisoning her own CHILD.

HOW frequently are we called upon to lament the untimely Death of our fellow-creatures, who are cut off by the stroke of Justice, for the perpetration of crimes which make humanity shudder! — Of all the atrocious acts which are committed by Mortals, that of Murder is of the greatest magnitude: 'Tis a Sin of the deepest dye: and calls loudly to Heaven for immediate Vengeance. If the guilty wretch escape the sword of Justice, yet sooner or later we generally find that necessary observation verified, 'Be sure your Sin will find you out.' We cannot but be deeply affected at the depravity of human nature, when we find it arrive to that degree of barbarity as to destroy, 'The noblest work of God.' The Creator enquires, 'Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the fruit of her womb?' Which question implies the almost impossibility of such a depraved conduct, and were it not that we have seen and heard of such things, we should be ready to say, 'It is impossible.' But matters of fact compel us to say such inhuman wretches are found among the sons of men, as the following account will fully prove.

MARY VOCE, the unfortunate subject of our narrative, was on Friday, the 12th of March, arraigned at the Bar, before the Hon. Sir Richard Graham, Knight, and stood charged with having poisoned her Child, an Infant about six weeks old.

It appears from the evidence given on Trial, that she had applied at a respectable Druggist's shop to purchase arsenick, but not having any person with her, they refused selling her any; she then applied at another shop, and for the same reason as before she was refused. She then applied at another shop, and was also refused till she brought another person with her, whom they properly interrogated respecting the purpose for which she wanted the poison; He answered, he knew she wanted it to poison rats with. Here she succeeded in her purpose. During the course of the Trial she presented a Letter to his Lordship, the substance of which is as follows, That her Husband having left her she was apprehensive of coming to poverty and distress, and during the anxiety of her mind, she resolved upon the desperate plan of terminating her own existence: That she mixed the fatal draught in a cup, but before she had time to put her horrid resolution in effect, a neighbour called upon her and invited her out to breakfast, which invitation she accepted of, and that during her absence, some Children or person unknown to her, must have given the poison to the Child. A Witness was then called upon, who declared that the Prisoner had been out to breakfast that morning as stated in the Letter.

After two hours or more had been employed in the examination of Witnesses, during which the Judge displayed great candour towards the unfortunate Prisoner; He then proceeded to sum up the evidence, taking particular notice of every circumstance which had appeared in her favour, more especially he called the attention of the Jury to the apparent state of her mind during the illness of her Infant; That she was found *wringing her hands and weeping bitterly,* this, he said, was worthy their attention; for the Evidence deposed, that she saw the Tears, &c. all of which were signs of real Grief.

After having summed up the evidence, the Jury withdrew, and in about ten minutes returned a Verdict GUILTY.

The Judge then proceeded to pronounce Sentence of Death, and gave her a very impressive exhortation to improve the few hours she had to live, in imploring Pardon for her Sins, and in particular for the very horrid and unnatural Crime, the Murder of her own Infant. During the whole time the Prisoner seemed much affected, and when the awful sentence was pronounced, she was unable to stand under it.

For a few hours after her condemnation she was almost frantic, and afterward acknowledged that had she had an opportunity, she would have put an end to her existence; but one person or other being constantly with her, who were solicitous for her eternal Welfare, she became more calm and thoughtful, hearkened to their seasonable admonitions, and manifested signs of genuine Repentance. She fully confessed her crime and acknowledged she had been guilty of administering the poison to the Child, and earnestly implored Heaven to have mercy on her Soul. — Which Mercy we hope she has found.

This poor unfortunate woman whose untimely death we are now deploring, was born at Snenton, near Nottingham, and was a natural Child of the late Paul Simpson of Bobbers Mill. Her mother's name was Hallam, and she resided at Snenton about three years, when she left, and went to live near Newark, and was married to a Boatman, but we understand she is since dead. She left her Child in the care of a distant relation at Snenton, where she was brought up, and where she continued to reside till the time of her marriage to her surviving husband Thomas Voce. She has had four children, one of which only is living, a

Boy about five years of age; Her husband is a Pensioner, and is obliged to go to Chatham once in three years on account of his Pension; during the time he was absent on one of these Journies, which was sometime in March, 1801, she had entertained another Man in her house, and cohabited with him, refusing to admit her legal husband. They lived separate till the latter end of September, when her husband was informed she was in the greatest distress, having been brought to bed, and the person she had been familiar with had forsaken her. In this situation he visited her, and she manifested tokens of sorrow for her misconduct, acknowledged how ill she had used him, and that if he would forgive the past, she would treat him with greater kindness in future; he hearkened to her invitations, and was prevailed upon to receive her into his favour, but alas! their reunion was but of short duration, she fell into the same crime again, on account of which together with some difference which arose on another occasion, a separation took place again, which happened on Friday, the 7th of Nov. and on the Monday following she perpetrated the horrid crime for which she has forfeited her Life.

Her general Character has been very indifferent, she acknowledged to having lived a very dissolute Life, and has been guilty of several petty crimes. During the short interval between her Condemnation, and her Execution, she sent a message to her husband, hoping he would forgive her, but did not wish to see him, as it would only have a tendency to disturb her mind, and augment her grief. She saw her Son, and took a most affectionate and parting Farewel, committing him to the care of Providence.

May every such awful occurrence as we have now been recording, operate as a powerful warning to all those Persons who find themselves tempted to evil, that they may not be drawn away by their own lust and enticed. How needful that divine caution, ‘Watch and Pray that ye enter not into Temptation.’ May we be found frequently invoking Heaven to keep us back from presumptuous sins, that they may not have dominion over us, that we may be innocent, and free from the great Transgression.

(Sutton, Printer.)

Notes

New readers should be aware that these annotations discuss details of the plot.

Biblical quotations refer to the Authorized Version, and Eliot's minor misquotations are not corrected.

The following abbreviations are used:

GEJ	*The Journals of George Eliot,* ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
Letters	*The George Eliot Letters,* ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954–78).
Wiesenfarth	Joseph Wiesenfarth, 'George Eliot's Notes for *Adam Bede', Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 32:2 (September 1977), pp. 127–65. Eliot's notebook is in the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[EPIGRAPH]

1. *'So that…' WORDSWORTH:* From William Wordsworth's long philosophical poem *The Excursion* (1814), Book VI, lines 651–8, in a section where a pastor tells the stories of his dead parishioners, including Ellen, a young mother buried with her dead baby — 'a virtuous woman, in pure youth… delivered to distress and shame' when she becomes pregnant and her lover abandons her. George Eliot read all of Wordsworth's poems at an early age, and bought herself a six-volume set of his works when she was twenty-one. She especially admired *The Excursion* which she read with George Henry Lewes in February 1858: it 'repaid us for going to the end by an occasional fine passage even to the last' (2–3 February 1858, *GEJ,* p. 73). Eliot's epigraphs for her novels and chapter headings are always highly significant, and Wordsworth figures more frequently than any other author except Shakespeare. On her attitude to Wordsworth's poetry, see Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 145–67.

BOOK FIRST

CHAPTER I

The Workshop

1. *With a single drop of ink… visions of the past:* A tiny pool of ink poured into the palm of any person, but especially a child's, was said to allow gifted individuals the means of 'scrying' past and future. See Introduction, pp. 1–2. See also Wiesenfarth, p. 128, and Letters III, 301.

2. *the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799:* Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign (Chapter XXXIII) was one of his most successful. He left Egypt in August 1799 and slipped through the British blockade. On his return to France in November he overthrew the ruling Directorate in France in the *coup d'état* of the 18th Brumaire and made himself First Consul. In the meantime, French troops were campaigning in Italy against the combined forces of Austria, Russia and Britain. On 15 August 1799 the French general Barthélémy-Catherine Joubert was killed at the battle of Novi Ligure where the French were defeated. When back in France, Napoleon turned his attention to annexing Italy and was eventually to succeed in taking Venice and penetrating as far as Rome. These events were to have serious consequences in England, which had been at war with Revolutionary France since 1793, in that they led

to the Napoleonic wars which dominated public life until his defeat at Waterloo in 1815.

In the Epilogue the narrator tells us that the date is 1807 and that the events of the novel began 'nine years' ago, but this mistake does not affect the essence of the story.

3. *wainscoting:* Wooden panelling for interior use tacked on over plaster, providing both warmth and decoration.

4. *'Awake my soul… noonday clear':* From the first and third stanzas of a hymn by Bishop Thomas Ken (1637–1711), also quoted at the end of the chapter. It is the third morning hymn in the hymnal published with the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

5. *Adam Bede was a Saxon, and justified his name:* From the Old English 'bede', to bid, command or pray; connected to the German 'gebiet'. His biblical first name is that of the first man and the father of the human race; the second suggests his ancient lineage and authority. His occupation as a carpenter indicates his relation to Christ.

6. *Seth's:* Seth was the third son — after Cain and Abel (see also Chapter VIII, note 6) — of Adam and Eve. Seth's hair and eye colour changes in Chapter L.

7. *the exact contour of a coronal arch:* The coronal or frontal bone shapes the forehead and the crown. In the study of phrenology, developed by Franz Joseph Gall (1757–1828) and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776–183 2) personality and temperament are said to be revealed by the contours and proportions of the skull, and the frontal bone governs the learning, and observing faculties. Eliot's friend Charles Bray was converted to the pseudo-science of phrenology by the writings of George Combe. In August 18 51 Combe observed Eliot's own head and pronounced that her Destructiveness was prominent and her Amativeness undeveloped. She was rather proud that her own 'organ of affectiveness' was considered 'highly developed' (Gordon Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 100–101).

8. *thee'st:* 'Thee' is an intimate form of address, often used by Quakers and other dissenting groups in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

9. *Methody:* A slang term for Methodist, the followers of John and Charles Wesley (1703–91 and 1707–88) who founded a religious society at Oxford University in 1729, and were so called because they favoured a simple and methodical approach to faith. Along with their friend George Whitefield, they initiated a campaign for reform in the established Church of England, but this was not well received, and they gradually broke away to become best known for their efforts to extend the teaching of the Gospel to working people and had a greater success rate in the new industrial towns among factory workers, miners and mill-workers than in rural areas (see Chapter II). John Wesley himself was reluctant to make this break and remained a priest in Anglican orders all his life. To begin with, the Methodists preached in the open air in public places, but later the movement built simple chapels. By the end of the eighteenth century Methodism had splintered into many separate factions, e.g. Eliot's aunt Elizabeth Evans (whom she called 'Aunt Samuel'), and on whom the character of Dinah is partly based, was a Wesleyan, then a Primitive Methodist and was later associated with the Arminian Methodists of Derby, called the Derby Faith Folk (see also Chapter VIII, note 3). For an account of the rise of Methodism, see *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain,* ed. R. Davies, R. George and G. Rupp, 4 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1965–88). For the story of the literary influence of the movement, see Valentine Cunningham's *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Eliot made extensive notes on material drawn from Robert Southey's *The Life of Wesley, and Rise and Progress of Methodism,* ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey, 3rd edn (1846), see Wiesenfarth, pp. 131–7, 151–3.

10. *th' red-pot:* A marking dye used by carpenters for setting out patterns and specifications on pieces of wood.

11. *sarmunt:* Sermon.

12. *'What come ye out for to see… a prophetess':* A reference to Christ's words about John the Baptist: 'But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet' (Matthew 11:9).

13. *women preachin':* Women, as well as men, preached in the informal early days of Methodism, but many

within the movement felt that the display was inappropriate and immodest. See Mary Anne Schofield, '"Women's Speaking Justified": The Feminine Quaker Voice, 1662–1797', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, 6:i* (Spring 1987), pp. 61–77. See also Epilogue, note 1.

14. *jest-book:* A book of jokes or amusing stories cheaply produced for the lower end of the market.

15. *dissenters:* Those members of Protestant religious groups who disagreed with some or all of the established doctrines and practices of the Church of England, e.g. Methodist, Baptist, Nonconformists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Quakers.

16. *canals… Cromford:* During the eighteenth century Britain was at the centre of the great developments of the Industrial Revolution. As a practical working man Adam takes an interest in all the new inventions and engineering enterprises, including the canal system, unfolding all across England (see Chapter XXXIII, note 4); the aqueducts that brought water supplies to the major cities; the coal-pit engines which harnessed power for digging and lifting — operations previously carried out by hand or by man or horse power; and the new machines invented for spinning yarn developed by Richard Arkwright (1732–92) in his cloth factories at Cromford.

17. *the tabernacle:* In Exodus 25–7 the Lord instructed Moses and the children of Israel as to how they should build an ark and the trappings of the tabernacle, or sacred place, that would hold it.

18. *the bakehouse:* Many working people did not have an oven in their own house even well into the nineteenth century. Each village or town district would have a local bakehouse, and the housewife took her loaves of bread or meat to be baked there for a small fee.

19. *a-praying and a-groaning:* A great deal of histrionic display was characteristic of some aspects of dissenting religions.

20. *a wool-gathering chap:* A colloquial expression for a daydreamer.

21. *Mum Taft… true to his name, had kept silence:* To 'keep mum' is a slang term for to 'keep silent'.

22. *grindstone:* A heavy rotating stone driven by hand or power and used to file knives to a fine point or to grind wheat ears into flour.

23. *the door-stone:* The threshold stone.

24. *portmanteau:* From French: literally for 'carrying cloaks', a suitcase.

CHAPTER II

The Preaching

1. *a pretty take of land:* The Donnithorne Arms would have been part of the Donnithorne estate, let to Casson, the former butler, along with a substantial piece of land.

2. *a piece of unenclosed ground:* Up until the eighteenth century most land in England was not enclosed, that is fenced in, and much of it was 'common land', available for use to all local inhabitants for grazing and firewood. With the agricultural and industrial revolutions, large landowners started to fence off such land for more efficient management, but this became a serious cause for discontent in rural areas.

3. *a 'spotty globe', as Milton:* John Milton, *Paradise Tost* (1667), Book I, line 291.

4. *ostler… smock-frock:* An ostler is one who looks after the riding and carriage horses so essential for transport up until the middle of the nineteenth century. A smock-frock was a long shirt commonly worn by country workers, where threads are sewn crisscross, pulling the fabric tight, across the top, so that it gave a snug fit to the breast while allowing unrestricted movement for the limbs.

5. *Parson Irwine… doesn't live here:* It was common for vicars to hold the livings for two or more parishes (see Chapter V, note 2), so they could choose in which they lived depending on the state of the

accommodation.

6. *a grey cob:* An English or Irish breed, generally defined as a horse of any colour of between 14.2 to 15.1 hands and of good workmanlike appearance. (A hand is approximately 4 inches or **10 cm.)**

7. *umbels:* Cup-shaped flowers, from the Latin, *umbella* or shade.

8. *Sehon… endureth for ever:* Psalm 136:19–20. Joshua Rann is the parish clerk and therefore responsible for reading the psalms during the Anglican service (and uses the Book of Common Prayer's version of names for the Authorized Version's 'Sihon' and 'Bashan').

9. *Quaker-like costume:* 'Quakers' is a nickname for the seventeenth-century Society of Friends founded by George Fox. It comes from the notion that they 'quaked' with emotion at their religious meetings. They were distinguished by the adoption of a severe form of dress, usually grey or black with a plain white collar and no ornament.

10. *olive-branch:* The biblical allusion (e.g. Psalm 128:3) extends the notion of the family 'tree', rather than a peace symbol.

11. *Ye gallows young dog:* A reproof uttered as an endearment. The child is naughty; see Chapter VI, note 11.

12. *groon:* Groan.

13. *Dinah:* According to the biblical story, Dinah was the only daughter of Jacob and Leah (she is raped and her brothers take a terrible revenge — Genesis 34).

14. *works at a mill:* The new cloth mills in the industrial North employed a great many people, including women and children. Through the nineteenth century commercial competition meant that conditions for the workforce deteriorated rapidly. By the mid nineteenth century legislation was passed to restrict working hours and conditions for women and for children.

15. *when a poor woman, laden with sins… she found Thee sitting at the well:* See John 4:4–30. Dinah's text for her sermon is Luke 4:18, but she also draws on Psalms 63:6, 119:148; Luke 24:32; Psalm 119:151; Acts 26:18; Matthew 11:28; John 10:10; Luke 23:34; Matthew 24:30; and 2 Timothy 4:1. Luke 4:18 was John Wesley's text when he preached his first sermon in the open air to the miners of Kingswood in Bristol, and Dinah's rhetorical technique is adapted from his.

16. *oat-cake:* As opposed to bread which, being made from wheat flour, was more expensive.

17. *the Ranter:* Originally the name for a mid-seventeenth-century sect, the Antinomians, which stressed the individual's direct communication with God (see Chapter V, note 31), but subsequently a common term for dissenters of all kinds, who were popularly distinguished by their inclination to 'rant' enthusiastically.

18. *'curcheyed':* Curtsied. A respectful form of greeting conventionally offered by their inferiors to all the gentry.

19. *'an egg, an apple, or a nut:'* An old English proverb: 'An apple, an egg and a nut, you may eat though dressed by a slut.'

20. *visible manifestations of Jesus:* Visions or emanations that testified to the actual presence of Christ in the world.

21. *Its streams the whole creation reach… Enough for evermore:* The fourth stanza of Hymn 241 ('Thy ceaseless, unexhausted love'), by Charles Wesley, in *A Collection of Hymns, For the Ose of the People Called Methodists* (1780). Unlike the Quakers (for instance), Methodism endorsed the use of hymn-singing in the act of worship.

CHAPTER III

After the Preaching

1. *It was borne in upon my mind:* An expression used by dissenters to describe their experience of God's will communicated directly to their understanding.

2. *"And after we had seen the vision… go into Macedonia":* As Eliot explains later in this chapter, opening the Bible at random in search of spiritual and practical guidance was common practice among the early Methodists. Here it is Acts 16:10 where the Apostle Paul, travelling with Silas, has a vision of a 'man of Macedonia' asking them to 'Come over… and help us' (verse 9).

3. *Hetty Sorrel:* It seems highly likely that Eliot was influenced in her choice of first name by Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), where Hester Prynne was seduced by Arthur Dimmesdale. Hetty's proper name is only used once (Chapter LXXIII). Sorrel is a plant with bitter leaves used in salad.

4. *"And Jacob served seven years for Rachel… for the love he had to her":* Genesis 29:20. Rachel was the daughter of Laban who promised her to Jacob in return for seven years' labour. At the expiry Laban deceived Jacob by marrying him to his elder daughter Leah. Jacob then had to undertake another seven years of service in order to marry Rachel. On Jacob, see also note 11, Chapter VIII, note 2 and Chapter L, note 3.

5. *"She that's married… how she may please her husband":* 1 Corinthians 7:34. Seth's second, positive, quotation about marriage (1 Timothy 5:14) is Paul writing specifically about young widows and how to govern their behaviour. Unless it is Eliot who has misremembered (which I doubt) I think we may assume that Dinah would have known that Seth is interpreting Scripture. For 'two are better than one' he is again reapplying Ephesians 5:31: 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh', and conflating it with Ecclesiastes 4:9: 'Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour', and with Acts 4:32: 'the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul'.

6. *two tall stones, which performed the office of a stile:* The point of these two tall stones is that a person can manoeuvre their way from field to field, but the livestock cannot.

7. *"as God has distributed to every man… so let him walk":* 1 Corinthians 7:17.

8. *a leading of Providence:* Dinah construes her understanding of God's wishes as 'provided' by Him.

9. *passing the love of women:* From the story of David and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1:26.

10. *"In darkest shades… she my rising sun":* 'My God, the spring of all my joys', by Isaac Watts, which was included in the revised collection of Methodist hymns in 1797. Seth adapts, as the pronouns should be masculine, for the hymn is in praise of God.

11. *this land of Goshen:* Joseph, second youngest son of Jacob by his favourite wife Rachel (see note 4), was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. But in Egypt he found favour with the Pharaoh and rose to an eminent position. When his brothers came to him seeking food, he arranged that they should be shamed into acknowledging their crime. He was subsequently reconciled with them and reunited with his father and his younger brother Benjamin in the 'land of Goshen' where there was plenty (Genesis 45:10). See also Chapter VIII, note 12.

12. *the three concords:* The grammatical principle of formal agreement between words as parts of speech which requires, for instance, that the verb should match the subject in terms of case, number, gender and person. In Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) under the heading 'Concordance' 3: 'A concord in grammar; one of the three chief relations in speech. It is not now in use in this sense. "After the three *concordances* learned, let the master read unto him the epistles of Cicero." Ascham' (9th edition, London, 1806).

    To make sense of the reference, the reader needs to look back a few lines to Eliot's remarks on the old-fashioned Methodists' belief in a 'literal way of interpreting the Scriptures' and to her humorous apology for her own inability to 'represent their diction as correct, or their instruction as liberal'. Her argument is that one can never expect complete consistency — or agreement, or concord — between people's feelings, actions and principles.

13. *loftier sorrows… fiery passions:* The fashion for 'silver-fork' novels published in the mid nineteenth century was one that Eliot roundly condemned in 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', *Westminster Review, 66* (October 1856), pp. 442–61. This essay followed on from one in which she had set out her own theories for an ideal modern fiction in 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review, 66* (July 1856), pp. 51–79 (see Introduction, p. xxxi). Both are reprinted in George Eliot's *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

CHAPTER IV

Home and its Sorrows

1. *short bed-gown… a considerable length of linsey-wolsey:* An undergarment worn either or both in bed and underneath one's outer clothes. Linsey-wolsey is a coarse cloth made of flax or cotton and wool.

2. *till the last child's born:* A colloquial saying, i.e. Adam will always finish every piece of work undertaken.

3. *chapellin':* Going to chapel, or to the preaching or dissenting worship of whatever kind.

4. *workhus:* The workhouse. Poor people who could not support themselves had to throw themselves upon 'the Parish', which established workhouses to provide a roof, clothing, food and minimal care, under the Poor Law acts of 1601. Obviously these were not lavish, and gradually there came to grow up not only a fear of conditions in the workhouse, but of the social stigma attached to the public acknowledgement of destitution.

5. *the house-place:* The main living-room which would have included the kitchen.

6. *if Solomon was as wise… rainy day:* Proverbs 27: 15: 'A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike.'

7. *day-clock:* A clock with a relatively simple mechanism which needs winding up every day. Below, 'in advance of the day' means the clock runs fast.

8. *the school:* Evening classes for working men run by the schoolmaster.

9. *paying his savings… from going for a soldier:* During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, a shortage of manpower meant that men were conscripted into the army or press-ganged into the navy. Only by paying for a substitute could a young and healthy man be excused his turn. See J. R. Western, *The English Militia in the Eighteenth Century: The Story of a Political Issue 1660–1802* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 205–71.

10. *Take no thought for the morrow:* Matthew 6:3 4, which continues 'for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' See also Chapter XXX.

11. *a peck o' thy own words out o' a pint o' the Bible's:* A peck is a measure of dry goods, equivalent to one quarter of a bushel, or two gallons. A pint is a considerably smaller liquid measure, equivalent to one-eighth of a gallon (in metric to about half a litre).

12. *"God helps them as helps theirsens":* A proverb which was collected in Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* for June 1736. This is one of the books that Adam has read (see Chapter XIX and note 3).

13. *a flick:* A flitch, or leg joint.

14. *to set up his tent in a far country… all the days of her pilgrimage:* A mix of biblical allusions, to Genesis 47:9, Hebrews 11:13, etc., as well as a thematic reference to the Christian life as a pilgrimage. The image also suggests the biblical fathers living in tents and continually moving on, as Abraham does in Genesis 13:18, and refers also to the story of the Prodigal Son who becomes a wanderer in a 'far country' in Luke 15:11–32 (see also Chapter XLV, note 6).

15. *dear times:* The cost of living went up considerably during times of war and shortages.

16. *a diorama:* A series of painted canvases set up along a tunnel that you look down which would be selectively illuminated so that it appeared to be a succession of moving pictures, invented by Daguerre and Bouton and first exhibited in London in a specially built theatre in Regent's Park in 1823.

17. *the wonderful pigeon-house at Broxton parsonage:* From the Middle Ages on the gentry kept pigeons to provide them with fresh meat.

18. *his 'mensuration book':* A quick guide to calculations and measuring figures.

19. *"They that are strong… please themselves":* Adam seems to have adapted this proverb from Romans 15:1: 'We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.'

20. *prognostics… willow wand:* After the publication of the first edition, Eliot felt that she had not sufficiently explained the nature of Adam's reliance on superstition. John Chapman had specifically mentioned the introduction of superstition as a 'disfigurement' in a realist novel in his review of *Adam Bede* in the *Westminster* Review NS 15 (April 1859), p. 510. She wrote to her publisher John Blackwood on 29 April 1859 that she wanted to expand this explanation: 'Some readers seem not to have understood what I meant, namely — that it was in Adam's peasant blood and nurture to believe in this, and that he narrated it with awed belief to his dying day. That is not a fancy of my own brain, but a matter of observation, and is in my mind an important feature in Adam's character' *(Letters,* III, 60). Accordingly Eliot prepared an additional passage which appeared in the fourth edition in 1859: 'prognostics, and to his dying day… the sympathy that comprehends them'. The first edition had read 'prognostics, and you see he shuddered at the idea of the stroke with the willow wand'.

Various superstitions accrue around willow: in some parts of England it was considered unlucky to burn willow, to bring the catkins of pussy willow into the house, and a child or an animal struck with a willow rod was believed likely to sicken or die.

CHAPTER V

The Rector

1. *Provence roses:* Large blowsy roses originating from the south of France.

2. *a pluralist at whom the severest Church-reformer:* A pluralist was a vicar who held more than one living in order to keep up his income. Church reformers objected to such abuses because this often meant that he would neglect some congregations. Eliot made notes on the practice in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Wiesenfarth, pp. 143–4, 160–61.

3. *president:* Anyone who presides over a scene or a meeting.

4. *mullioned oriel window… the walls… not yet painted:* This room has been built recently, and its plastered walls are not yet dry enough to be painted. A mullion is the window upright, in stone or wood. An oriel window projects from the wall, is supported by brackets and does not extend to the ground.

5. *a massive silver waiter:* A large platter used like a tray.

6. *a coat of arms conspicuous:* Parson Irwine's old silver is engraved with a heraldic device, once the exclusive right of the aristocracy. The implication is that he comes from a family that was once both wealthy and noble.

7. *powdered hair:* For most of the eighteenth century the upper classes wore either wigs or powdered their own hair with a variety of concoctions made from flour or rice. By 1799 this style was quite old-fashioned. Eliot made notes on eighteenth-century costume and even made little drawings of fashionable hats for the period in her notebook, see Wiesenfarth, pp. 137–8,154–5.

8. *Ceres:* The Greek goddess of the harvest.

9. *right divine:* Eliot plays here on the idea of Mrs Irwine's aristocratic credentials, and the divine right of

kings.

10. *Dauphin:* The title for the heir presumptive to the French throne. In 1799 the French royal family had but recently been deposed, and the King, Queen and young Dauphin executed. The pet name suggests the reactionary character of Mrs Irwine's politics and attitudes, as well as her royalist leanings.

11. *witch-mother, you sorceress:* The pagan references in this passage, along with the close connection to a Catholic royal family, indicates that Eliot knows that Irwine — classically educated as he would have been — does not take his religious duties altogether seriously.

12. *Juno:* Juno or Hera was the Queen of the Greek and Roman gods, patron of marriage and childbirth.

13. *St Thomas… th' Easter dues:* St Thomas's falls on 3 July. Each person qualified by property in any parish was expected to give a tithe (dues) to the Church which would provide an income for the vicar.

14. *the quire… counter-singin':* The choir; singing in counterpoint, with different parts of the choir taking different tunes.

15. *church lead:* The drains, parapets and windows of churches were often dressed in lead as a long-lasting material, but it was also useful and valuable — and an easy target for thieves and unscrupulous workmen.

16. *if his comb isn't cut a bit:* If he is not curbed. The analogy is with a boisterous cockerel's flamboyant comb.

17. *a blind Pharisee:* In the Gospels the Pharisees, a privileged religious sect, figure as the worst kind of arrogant and hypocritical teachers. In Matthew 15:12–14 they appear as the 'blind leaders of the blind'; see also Matthew 23:16.

18. *"dumb dog"…"idle shepherd":* Isaiah 56:10: 'His watchmen are… all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs'; Zechariah 11:17: 'Woe to the idle shepherd that leaveth the flock!'

19. *coxy:* Cocky; that is, bumptious and arrogant; behaving like a coxcomb. See also Chapter XVI.

20. *cracklin' o' thorns under a pot:* Ecclesiastes 7:6: 'For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool.'

21. *the Sacriment-cup:* The precious cup used in the Communion service to hold the wine which transubstantiates into the blood of Christ.

22. *only a captain in the Loamshire Militia… His Majesty's regulars:* The Loamshire Militia would have been volunteers recruited locally in the time of national emergency, while the King's regular troops were professional soldiers.

23. *crowner:* The coroner, who is called in to investigate suspicious deaths of any kind.

24. *grand-vizier:* Chief minister. The Grand Vizier was the officer who assisted Muslim rulers, especially the Sultan of Turkey. In England the term is best known through Oriental tales.

25. *St Catherine:* The most famous of the many saints with this name is Catherine of Alexandria (d. *c.* 310) who was martyred on a wheel. Arthur's familiarity with her appearance is probably indicative of his having seen a number of pictures in churches that he might have visited in Catholic countries abroad.

26. *a story of hatred andpersecution… their magazine:* The *Arminian Magazine,* published 1778–97, became the *Methodist Magazine,* 1798–1821, and then the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine.* It included stories of Methodist heroism in the face of persecution.

27. *poor lean cobblers:* Shoemakers were popularly supposed to be notorious radicals.

28. *my majority:* Arthur's coming of age when he turns twenty-one in July.

29. *an Olympian goddess:* Mount Olympus was the home of the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece.

30. *"Lyrical Ballads"…"The Ancient Mariner":* Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's first volume of poems was published anonymously in 1798. Coleridge wrote 'The Ancient Mariner' (see Chapter XLV and note 7).

31. *Antinomianism and Evangelicalism:* Eliot is generalizing about the state of religious and social ferment that characterized the late eighteenth century. Antinomianism or 'lawlessness' is the idea that members of a particular religious dispensation are not obliged to adhere to moral or ethical law (see also Chapter II, note 17). Evangelicalism centres on the idea that belief comes through personal experience of conversion, a concept fundamental to the practice of Methodism.

32. *the King's health… Lord Dacey's lawsuit:* King George III suffered periodic bouts of 'madness' from 1760 to 1820, probably due to a metabolism problem. Eventually he was declared unfit to rule and his son acted as Prince Regent. In August 1799 Napoleon Bonaparte returned to France from his continuing campaign in Egypt. Lord Dacey is a fictional local aristocrat.

33. *epicurean:* The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 bc) is often mistakenly attributed with a creed of pleasure for its own sake. In fact, his theories advocate freedom from pain as the greatest good.

34. *the 'travelling preacher':* The Wesley brothers travelled across the country to preach the Word of God, and insisted their preachers, whether professional or lay, did the same.

35. *lusts of the flesh… receiving money:* See 1 John 2:16, 1 Kings 7:1, Matthew 6:31, John 10:12, John 6:48 and Matthew 21:12 (like the moneychangers in the Temple).

36. *honourable members:* Members of Parliament.

37. *Sophocles or Theocritus:* Greek tragedian (496–406 bc); Greek lyric poet (*fl. c.* 270 BC), author of the pastoral *Idylls.* (Isaiah and Amos are books in the Old Testament.)

38. *body to be burned… charity:* 1 Corinthians 13:3: 'And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.'

39. *panegyric:* A rhetorical term for a complimentary speech.

CHAPTER VI

The Hall Farm

1. *a chancery suit:* The Court of Chancery dealt with disputes over property and wills but it was notoriously slow in its deliberations, and was most famously attacked in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1851–2).

2. *dogs:* A metal frame for supporting large logs in a fireplace.

3. *a pillion:* A light saddle for a woman, or else a secondary saddle designed for the person who rides behind the horseman.

4. *the finest Greek sculpture:* The marble sculptures of antiquity were much admired in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One major collection was in the sculpture galleries of the Vatican museum, described by Eliot in *Middlemarch* (1871–2). Such surviving statues had often lost their protruding parts simply because they were vulnerable to accident. See Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture 1500–1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

5. *a watering-place:* During the eighteenth century a new fashion grew up for sea bathing and fresh air which led to many English coastal towns such as Brighton and Hastings becoming the haunt of the rich and famous. Their decline marked their adoption as holiday locations by a different class.

6. *eight-day clock:* An elaborate piece of machinery designed to require winding only once a week.

7. *the 'whittaw':* A dialect version of 'whittawer', the saddler and harness maker.

8. *shone like jasper:* The walls of the new Jerusalem are built of semi-precious stone, see Revelation 21:11.

9. *Martha and Mary:* See Luke 10:38–42. Friends of Jesus, two sisters: Martha is the bustling practical housewife, Mary the contemplative, listening to him.

10. *churning-day:* The day when the collected milk was churned into butter.

11. *gallowsness:* A common threat addressed to the young, the idle and the mischievous — that they will end their lives with being hanged on the gallows.

12. *since last Michaelmas, and I hired you… without a bit o' character:* The contracted time of servants' hire was measured out with set dates in the calendar. Michaelmas (29 September) and Lady Day (25 March), quarter-days, were the prime dates for hiring. Molly came to Mrs Poyser with no 'character', that is, no references from her previous employers. 'Treddles'on stattits' is a fair held on a regular basis by official statute.

13. *mawkin:* The scarecrow, which mopes, or 'mawks' because it does nothing, but, as a noun, originally a kitchenmaid (or a slattern) by association with the mop cloths used by the kitchen servant.

14. *the flax you've spoiled learning to spin:* Molly has been learning how to spin bundles of vegetable flax into long strands of linen thread for weaving.

15. *Comb the wool for the whittaws:* The wool is for stuffing the new-made saddle.

16. *Dantean picture:* That is, of the refined circles of particular hells devised for each specific crime, as portrayed in Dante's *Inferno,* the first section of his long poem *The Divine Comedy* (1300–1318).

17. *the dairy thralls:* The stands in the dairy set out for the milk churns.

18. *like a jack as is run down, istead o' getting your wheel out:* A jack, or clockwork machine, was suspended before the fire to turn the meat for roasting. 'Wheel' is a spinning wheel.

19. *bring up with a spoon:* As opposed to breast feeding.

20. *cunning:* Clever.

21. *i' the Catechism and the Prayer-book… in the Bible:* Mrs Poyser resorts to the authority of the Catechism, the formulaic expression of the tenets of faith in the Church of England learned by rote by every child before confirmation, and the Book of Common Prayer, the official guide to services in the Church of England, whereas Dinah uses only the Bible.

22. *without direction:* That is, without what Dinah felt to be God's direction and authority. 'Assurance', used just above, is another Evangelical word for confidence in a decision that comes directly from God. Both were received by signs or inner certainty.

23. *statty:* Statue.

24. *the factor:* An agent, who buys and sells on behalf of others.

CHAPTER VII

The Dairy

1. *calenture:* A tropical fever which afflicted sailors so that they believed the sea to be green fields and wanted to jump overboard.

2. *pattens:* High wooden shoes designed to go over the wearer's more closely fitting shoes to raise the feet out of the mud.

3. *a millennial abundance:* A fantasized time of plenty which comes only once in a thousand years.

4. *blue-bag:* The blue powder used as a whitening agent to bleach clothes.

CHAPTER VIII

A Vocation

1. *the good seed might fall on that soil:* Dinah is thinking of Jesus's parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:3–23.

2. *a good land… scarceness:* Deuteronomy 8:7, 9.

3. *a Wesleyan:* Reference to the first split in Methodism, between the Wesley brothers and Whitefield (see also Chapter I, note 9 and Chapter XVII, note 8).

4. *Miss Bosanquet:* Mary Bosanquet (1739–1815) married John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley in Shropshire, in 1781; she had worked in London and Manchester. Eliot borrowed Henry Moore's *Life of Mrs Mary Fletcher, Consort and Relict of the Rev. John Fletcher… Compiled from her Journal* (Birmingham, 1817) from her aunt Elizabeth Evans in March 1839 *(Letters,* I, 18). See also Chapter I, note 9. The first woman whose ministry was endorsed by John Wesley was Sarah Crosby (see Chapter XL, note 5), a friend of the Mrs Robinson of Derby who encouraged Elizabeth Evans to become a Methodist class-leader.

5. *deceive the brethren… his own way:* see Matthew 24:24; James 1:22; Hebrews 13:17; Isaiah 53:6.

6. *'Am I my brother's keeper':* Genesis 4:9: Cain's famous response when questioned by God as to the whereabouts of his brother Abel.

7. *my besetment:* My problem, my besetting sin or difficulty.

8. *heavens stretched out… given to me abundantly:* See Isaiah 40:22; Deuteronomy 33:27; Matthew 26:41 (see also Chapter L, note 11); 1 John 1:1; Ephesians 3:20.

9. *a lovely young woman on whom men's eyes are fixed:* The preacher Mrs Fletcher had worried about the possibility of her being perceived 'as a bad woman, or as a stage player' *(Life of Mrs Mary Fletcher,* ed. Moore, p. 89). Actresses in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had a popular reputation as loose women.

10. *Moses… saw the brightness of the Lord:* See Exodus 3:2: God spoke to Moses from the bushing bush, so the analogy is that it does not matter who speaks — whether man or woman — as long as they speak the Word of the Lord. On Moses, see also Chapter XII, note 1 and Chapter L, notes 4 and 10.

11. *lead a quiet life among the green pastures and the still waters:* Psalm 23:2.

12. *the patriarch Joseph:* As the father of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, descended from the twelve sons of Jacob, Joseph is a patriarch, forefather. He was expert in the skills of divination and prophecy. For his treatment of his father and brothers, see Chapter III, note 11.

13. *a Pyrrhic dance:* A dance devised by the ancient Greeks of Sparta in which the warlike motions of the battlefield were mimicked in a performance set to music.

14. *a worldly Sadducee:* The Sadducees were an aristocratic Jewish religious sect who supported the interests of rank and the rich. Along with the Pharisees, Jesus saw them as opposed to true godliness: see, e.g., Matthew 16:12.

15. *bare-ribbed runts on a common:* Thin, malnourished livestock, usually the weakest and last born, which graze the thin grass of common land.

16. *bacon-sword and sour-cake:* Bacon rind, and cheap filling biscuits made from oats and fermented dough.

17. *the key of B with five sharps to the frank and genial C:* The key of B major has five sharps, the key of C major has none. Music in C major has a broad warm tone. Eliot was a keen lover of music, and many of her works include portraits of singers and performers, including Mirah in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858);

Rosamund in *Middlemarch;* Gwendolen, the Princess Alcharisi, and the composer Klesmer in *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

18. *a bunch of dock-leaves:* The leaves of the common dock weed were used to pack up butter because they allowed moisture to penetrate to the butter and to keep it fresh.

CHAPTER IX

Hetty's World

1. *occasional regimentals:* The uniform of the local militia.

2. *Memnon's statue:* A huge black 'singing' statue at Thebes, said to be of Memnon, an Ethiopian prince killed in the Trojan war (but more likely of King Amenophis of the eighteenth Egyptian dynasty). The statue was supposed to give out a musical strain when touched by the rays of the rising sun and superstition explained this as Amenophis' greeting to his mother, the goddess of Dawn. In fact the statue was hollow, and the sun caused the warm air inside to be expelled through the throat.

3. *a master-man:* A master craftsman, so a man who works for himself, as opposed to a journeyman who is employed by another.

4. *Lady-day:* See Chapter VI, note 12.

5. *geck:* A fool, a simpleton.

6. *Nottingham lace:* At the end of the eighteenth century the town of Nottingham became famous for its lace, as the industry exploited the new inventions of the spinning-jenny by James Hargreaves and the spinning frame by Richard Arkwright.

7. *an amateur of damp quarries and skimming-dishes:* Quarries, floor tiles, which would be cool and damp in order to maintain a low temperature in the dairy. Skimming-dishes have a low spout, so that when the fresh milk is left to stand the cream rises to the top and allows the skimmed milk to be poured away from underneath.

8. *Hebe:* The goddess of youth and spring who waited on the ancient Greek gods and served their food and drink.

9. *phiz:* Short for 'physiognomy', that is, appearance, the arrangement of facial features.

10. *one might have escaped from Socrates himself:* Socrates (469–399 BC), an irascible and argumentative ancient Greek philosopher likely to engage opponents in debate in public places.

CHAPTER X

Dinah Visits Lisbeth

1. *ceiled houses:* Houses with plaster ceilings as opposed to bare rafters.

2. *churched:* A service of thanksgiving and cleansing offered when the woman went to church after the birth of a child.

3. *when I war ill an' cumbered wi' th' babby, an' made me the posset:* 'To be ill' was a euphemism for being either pregnant or in labour. 'Cumbered' is to be hampered. A 'posset' is a sweet drink made of milk flavoured with spices and wine taken as a remedy.

4. *cumber:* Burdensome rubbish.

5. *haft:* The handle of a knife or other cutting tool.

6. *a journeyman tramp:* A working farmhand who tramps from place to place offering his services for hire.

7. *queechy:* Feeble.

8. *a cade lamb… franzy:* A lamb abandoned by its mother which has to be fed by bottle and which may be undernourished as a result. 'Franzy' is difficult or irritable.

9. *the thack:* The thatched roof.

10. *what David did, when God took away his child from him:* See 2 Samuel 12: 15–23. When his son from his adultery with Bath-sheba died, David accepted God's will.

CHAPTER XI

In the Cottage

1. *the burthen and heat of the day:* Matthew 20:12, from Christ's parable of the vineyard (verses 1–16).

2. *carrier:* The cart would pass through the locality on a regular basis carrying goods and people.

CHAPTER XII

In the Wood

1. *Pharaoh's daughter… minding the infant Moses:* As the Israelites became a powerful presence in the land of Egypt (see Chapter III, note 11), Pharaoh — who had been warned that a boy child would be his downfall — declared that they should be culled. Miriam persuaded her mother to allow her baby brother Moses to be placed in a cradle and floated in the water where Pharaoh's daughter bathed. Just according to plan, she was attracted to the baby and brought him up as her own. See Exodus 2:1–10.

2. *his favourite song…'When the heart… with care':* John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) includes 'When the heart of a man', composed by Thomas d'Urfey. In the play (II.iii, Air 21) it is sung by the villain and seducer of women, MacHeath:

> If the heart of a Man is deprest with Cares,
> The Mist is dispell'd when a Woman appears;
> Like the Notes of a Fiddle, she sweetly, sweetly
> Raises the Spirits, and charms our Ears.
> Roses and Lillies her Cheeks disclose.
> But her ripe lips are more sweet than those.
> Press her,
> Caress her,
> With Blisses,
> Her Kisses
> Dissolve us in Pleasure, and Soft Repose.

3. *a hobble:* An awkward situation. Derived from an agricultural term where a horse or other animal is closely tethered.

4. *to increase Irwine's income for the vicarage of Hayslope:* The 'living' for each individual vicar was raised by the squire from his tithes drawn on the local tenantry.

5. *the age of frocks and trousers:* That is, when he was a child. Both girls and boys wore dresses in infancy.

6. *college:* Oxford or Cambridge.

7. *the whole sex:* 'The sex' was a common slang term for women in the eighteenth century.

8. *the Centaurs:* Mythical creatures, half man and half horse, who lived wild lives and had a lusty

disposition.

9. *haimabler:* More amiable.

10. *Dr Moore's Zeluco:* In the novel (1786) by Dr John Moore, Zeluco is a noble Sicilian who begins his career by strangling a canary and graduates to the seduction and abandonment of a young girl. He was an influence on Byron's *Don Juan* (1819–24). Zeluco ends badly.

11. *the ottoman:* A stuffed, cushioned seat (from Arabic). Like the Persian word 'sofa', these luxurious pieces of furniture were associated with a decadent East, appearing in depictions of harems and other places of indulgence in the Western imagination.

CHAPTER XIII

Evening in the Wood

1. *If a chest… from some unknown source:* An allusion to Goethe's *Faust* (Part I, 1808), where Gretchen finds a chest of jewels outside her door. It is a gift conjured by Mephistopheles who has promised to win her for the rejuvenated Faust, and the seduction duly takes place. Gretchen bears a child, is repudiated by her brother and dies insane, while Faust is filled with remorse and dissatisfaction.

   Lewes carried out much of the research for his *Life of Goethe* (1855) during his and Eliot's first trip to Germany. In 1863 Charles Gounod's opera *Faust* (1859), which is based on Goethe's story, was performed at Covent Garden. Eliot went to see it three times (29 July 1863, *GEJ,* p. 118). The opera includes the famous 'jewel song'.

2. *leveret:* A young hare.

3. *a shepherd in Arcadia… lips of Psyche:* Arcadia is the ancient name for a mountainous region in Greece, but in legend an ideal world of idyllic pastoral happiness. Eros, the Greek god of love, fell in love with Psyche, but Aphrodite forbade her son to see Psyche so he visited her only at night. When she took a candle to steal a look at him, he abandoned her.

CHAPTER XIV

The Return Home

1. *No more nor the cake 'ull come wi'out the leaven:* Breads or cakes will only rise with the inclusion of some raising agent, generally yeast or eggs or bicarbonate of soda.

2. *'Pilgrim's Progress': The Pilgrim's Progress, From This World To That Which Is To Come* (1678, 1684), an allegory of religious endeavour by John Bunyan (1628–88). Many editions, a number of them illustrated, were published.

3. *wisdom and knowledge:* According to Isaiah 11:2, these are two of the attributes of the Messianic descendant of Jesse in a passage which is interpreted in Christian tradition as referring to the coming of Christ.

4. *the momentous subject of the Hebrew points:* Written Hebrew originally had no vowels, and small marks indicated where they should go. It is an arcane study, but in the nineteenth century – especially among women who aspired to an intellectual education — to know Hebrew was regarded as the apogee of attainment. Eliot learned Hebrew for her biblical research and for her 1846 translation of D. F. Strauss's *Life of Jesus.* Cf. *Middlemarch,* Chapter 7, where Dorothea aspires to learn Hebrew.

5. *cowcumber:* Cucumber.

6. *dilling:* Darling.

7. *a kettle-cake:* A homemade bread cooked in a kettle, that is, a pot.

8. *the safe:* A ventilated cupboard or box designed to keep food cool and safe from flies.

9. *a crab:* A crab apple, growing wild, is sour to the taste.

10. *the rushlight:* A cheap form of illumination made by dipping a rush in tallow or wax.

CHAPTER XV

The Two Bed-Chambers

1. *hyacinthine:* That is, like hyacinths, but a standard poetical trope for describing hair, derived from Homer's *Odyssey,* Book VI, 231. In the English poets — and the epithet is used by Milton and Pope — the assumption is that they are describing dark blue-black hair like Hetty's. Hyacinthus was a beautiful boy beloved of Apollo who died when struck accidentally during a game of quoits, and the flower was said to have sprung up from the ground where he lay.

2. *white stockings, perhaps with silk clocks:* A fashion where the stocking is made of cotton ornamented with silk clocks woven down the sides.

3. *peculation:* Embezzlement of money or property.

4. *a fishy eye:* An eye with a vacant expression.

5. *the Jacob's Ladder:* A tall blue spiked flower that flowers in June, seeds itself and grows rampant. That Hetty does 'not like' this flower may suggest her lack of aspirational spiritual values: see the story of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:10–22.

6. *the milch cows:* The dairy cows in milk.

7. *And they all wept… exhortation and warning:* Acts 20:37: when Paul is about to depart from Ephesus, he calls together all the leaders of his newly established Church to warn them to beware of the wolves that will come among the flock after his departure (verses 17–36).

8. *trouble is appointed for us all here below:* See Job 5:7 and 14:1.

9. *the things of this life:* See 1 Corinthians 6:3.

10. *we set our hearts on things… for us to have:* See Colossians 3:2; see also Chapter XLI.

11. *the evil day:* See Ephesians 6:13.

CHAPTER XVI

Links

1. *when you have put your mouth… expectant ear at the other end:* Allusion to the practice of the Catholic confessional which promises anonymity.

2. *a proletaire with democratic ideas:* A proletarian or person of the lowest class. An allusion, given the French spelling, to the hopes and aims of the French Revolution, with its influence continuing well into the nineteenth century.

3. *fairings:* Gifts or treats purchased at local fairs.

4. *scagliola pillar:* A plaster imitation of a stone or marble pillar.

5. *the Foulis Æschylus:* Robert Foulis (1707–76) was a printer based in Glasgow who produced many classics.

His two-volume Greek-Latin edition (1746) of the tragedies of the playwright Aeschylus (525–456 bc) included the trilogy of the *Oresteia,* which Eliot was reading while she was working on *Adam Bede* (see Chapter XXII, note 10). Eliot also read Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* during this period (10 February 1858, *GEJ,* p. 73).

6. *the glebe:* The parish.

7. "Cras *ingens iterabimus aequor":* Horace, *Odes,* I.vii.32: 'Tomorrow we will set forth again on the vast sea.'

8. *Arthur Young's* books: Arthur Young (1741–1820) was secretary of the Board of Agriculture from 1793 and a prominent theorist on farming methods. He edited the *Annals of Agriculture* (1784–1809).

9. *tithe:* One-tenth. From the Middles Ages, church activities were supported by the 'tithe' exacted from the populace of one-tenth of their produce.

10. *the chorus in the Prometheus:* A reference to Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound,* II, 887–93, where there is a warning against marrying out of one's class:

Chorus

> Ah, sage, sage in sooth, was he who first pondered this truth in his mind and with his tongue gave it utterance — that to marry in one's own degree is far the best, and that neither among them that are puffed up by riches nor among them that are mighty in pride of birth should marriage be desired by him who toileth with his hands.

(Loeb edn., trans. Herbert Weir Smyth (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1922), I, p. 295).

11. *Nemesis:* Most exactly, just punishment for wrong-doing, but more generally, fate or destiny. In Greek legend Nemesis was the name of the goddess of retributive justice. Stephen Gill argues that Eliot drew on her own reading of Greek drama for her definitions of tragedy and discussed these issues in increasingly complex ways in her novels *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871–2). See her 'Notes on the Spanish Gypsy', which includes an analysis of the purpose and effects of tragedy, published by John Walter Cross in *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals* (Edinburgh and London, 1885), vol. 3, pp. 48–51, and see also Darrel Mansell Jr., 'George Eliot's Conception of Tragedy', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 22 (1967), pp. 155–71, and Robert E. Norton, 'The Aesthetic Education of Humanity: George Eliot's *Romola* and Schiller's Theory of Tragedy', *Journal of Aesthetic Education,* 25:4 (Winter 1991), pp. 3–20. See also Deborah Guth, *George Eliot and Schiller: Intertextuality and Cross-Cultural Discourse* (London: Ashgate, 2003).

12. *transparencies that made a great effect…'generous youth':* During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there was a great vogue for spectaculars. A transparency was a thin gauze used as a canvas upon which the picture was painted and then illuminated by candles. The movement of the cloth, and the judicious placement of the candles, led to the sense that the picture was alive.

In writing *Adam Bede* Eliot made copious notes to perfect her period detail. In the *Gentleman's Magazine* 69:1 (January 1799), pp. 73–5, there was a report on the celebrations at Belvoir Castle to mark the coming of age of John Henry, fifth Duke of Rutland: 'On this day, every magnificence which could fill the polished mind was exhibited at the Castle, and every joy which mirth and entertainment could give the rustic was found in its walls.' Inside the castle, 'fronting the grand staircase were two transparencies… One, Britannia trampling upon Faction, and with her spear piercing the monster through his head… On the other, a medallion of the Duke of Rutland. Motto: "Hail generous Youth"… At the celebrations the Duke appeared in the regimental dress of the Leicestershire militia.' Eliot jotted down details in her notebook, see Wiesenfarth, pp. 139, 155–6.

BOOK SECOND

CHAPTER XVII

In Which the Story Pauses a Little

1. *In Which the Story Pauses a Little:* Philosophical asides of this kind are typical of Eliot's method, but nowhere else does she set out her literary manifesto on the novelist's duty to be faithful to 'life' quite so clearly.

   Eliot made substantial revisions to the opening passages of this chapter when she compiled the corrections published in the one-volume 'Tenth Edition' of 1862. In the revised version she drops the pretence of addressing a 'lady reader' and tones down the sarcasm. In the first edition of 18 59 the second paragraph reads:

   > Certainly I could, my fair critic, if I were a clever novelist, not obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact, but able to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, my characters would be entirely of my own choosing, and I could select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But you must have perceived long ago that I have no such lofty vocation, and that I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.

   Doreen Roberts speculates that Eliot's outburst was initially prompted by her response to John Blackwood's letters written in March and April of 1858 where, among other things, he remarked that 'the passage page 53 about the identity of Love, religious feeling, and Love of Art would be better modified a little' *(Letters,* II, 444–6).

2. *many Dutch paintings:* During April 1858, while she was working on *Adam Bede,* Eliot and Lewes lived in Munich where they visited the art galleries, particularly the Glyptothek (*Letters,* II, 451, 454–5). She especially appreciated the paintings of the Dutch and Flemish schools, and the details of an 'old woman' she describes here have been linked to Gerard Dou's *Betende Spinnerin* which is at Munich.

3. *Apollo… Diana:* In Greek legend, Phoebus Apollo is the sun god, famous for his beauty. Eliot may have been thinking particularly of the ancient Greek statue called the Apollo Belvedere housed in the Vatican museum, but another candidate is the Apollo Barberini in the Glyptothek in Munich. Diana is the Greek (as Artemis) and Roman goddess of the moon. She was the twin sister of Apollo, famed for her skill in hunting, and considered the perfection of female beauty, although perpetually virgin.

4. *pot-house:* A public house, an ale house.

5. *lazzaroni:* Neapolitan beggars, thieves and street dwellers.

6. *an Oberlin or a Tillotson:* Jean Oberlin (1740–1826), clergyman from Alsace, who was famous for his efforts to improve the roads, schools and agricultural methods in his district. John Tillotson (1630–94), Archbishop of Canterbury, composed many famous sermons notable for their tone of tolerance and understanding.

7. *the doctrines of the Reformation:* When the Church of England was established in the fifteenth century, part of the break with the Catholic Church of Rome was attributable to the philosophies of a number of religious theorists across Europe who saw a need for 'Reform', especially in matters to do with patronage and ceremony.

8. *Arminians and the Calvinists:* The Dutch Protestant Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) argued that any person might save their soul by good works and therefore was responsible for their own salvation. The followers of the French theologian John Calvin (1509–64), by contrast, believed that the salvation or damnation of each human soul is preordained by God. This radical split in Evangelical teachings was one of the reasons for dissension among the Methodists: the Wesleys followed the Arminian line, George Whitefield and other Evangelical Anglicans espoused the Calvinist view.

9. *an epigram… French literature:* Eliot is being ironic, but it may be that she refers to the famous *bon mot* of Madame Cornuel, society hostess and letter writer: 'Il n'y a point de héros pour son valet de chambre' ('No man is a hero to his valet'), in *Lettres de Mlle Aisse a Madame Cornuel* (1787), Letter 13,'De Paris, 1728'.

CHAPTER XVIII

Church

1. *'dizening:* Bedizening, or adorning.

2. *drab:* A woollen cloth, lightish-brown to olive in colour and which gives its name to that shade.

3. *a large cornelian seal:* A personalized seal cut into the red gem-stone cornelian, which is a variety of chalcedony, used for sealing the wax on letters.

4. *tippet:* A kind of scarf, small cape or neckerchief.

5. *Christmas Day, Easter Sunday, and 'Whissuntide':* The chief Christian festivals which were also used to mark out the accounting and farming year — the last is properly Whitsuntide, which falls on the seventh day after Easter and marks the events of Pentecost (Acts 2), when the followers of Jesus spoke 'in tongues' inspired by the Holy Spirit.

6. *to turn the milk an' save the rennet:* Rennet, a digestive juice obtained from the stomach of a cow, is used to curdle milk to make junkets and other set milk dishes.

7. *"hove your neighbour as yourself":* See Matthew 22:39 and Mark 12:31.

8. *megrims:* Originally, fancies, wild notions. Later, headache, or bad temper (related to 'migraine').

9. *sweltered:* Overcome by heat exhaustion.

10. *key-bugles:* A relatively sophisticated trumpet instrument because the introduction of keys allowed for the more precise pitching of notes.

11. *Bishop Ken's evening hymn:* Beginning 'Glory to Thee, my God, this night'.

12. *Melodies die out, like the pipe of Pan:* Pan, the Greek god of flocks and shepherds, played a musical pipe of seven reeds. The legend is that with the coming of Christianity, Pan died and so his songs faded in memory.

13. *the General Confession:* In this recitation, which begins the Anglican service morning and evening, the whole congregation makes a confession of sin and pleads for forgiveness: 'We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.'

14. *smelling-bottle:* Smelling salts, a strong concoction, usually including carbonate of ammonia, were a universal lady's remedy through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course they should smell powerfully.

15. *those early Christians… in catacombs:* In the early years of the establishment of the Christian faith, believers were persecuted. In Rome especially, many took to the warren of catacombs, burial places below ground, outside the city walls where they built secret churches.

16. *a large occiput, and a prominent crown:* The back and the top of the human skull. Eliot is referring again to the study of phrenology.

17. *Thou sweep'st us… like dreams:* From Psalm 90:5, one of the funeral psalms. This is the revised wording of the 'New Version' of the Psalms by NahumTate and Nicholas Brady (1696), generally printed in the Book of Common Prayer.

18. *'In the midst of life we are in death':* From the Burial Service in the Book of Common Prayer.

19. *a Scotch name, she supposed:* It is actually more likely to be a Latin name, but Eliot is playing up the fact of Hetty's ignorance.

20. *th' anchor's Nelson:* Horatio Nelson was the Admiral in Chief of the British navy, and would go on to defeat the French at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

21. *spoon-meat:* Food for invalids, chopped up small and eaten with a spoon.

CHAPTER XIX

Adam on a Working Day

1. *Hetty, like a bright-cheeked apple hanging over the orchard wall… everybody must long for her:* A generalized metaphor, associated with young and desirable girls. See, for example, the ancient Greek legend of the Hesperides, who guarded the tree which grew golden apples. Otherwise, it may refer to the Greek lyric poet Sappho (late seventh to early sixth century bc), whose Fragment 105a was well known in the nineteenth century:

> 'Like the sweet apple which reddens upon the topmost bough,
> A-top on the top-most twig, — which the pluckers forgot, somehow, –
> Forgot it not, nay, but got it not, for none could get it till now.
> (Fragment 105a: Translation by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Poems* (1870))

2. *the Old and New Version:* Of the metrical Psalms. The Old Version was mainly by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins and was added to the Prayer Book in 1562. On the New Version, see Chapter XVIII, note 17.

3. *the apocryphal books… a 'History of Babylon':* Adam's reading includes the 'apocryphal books' of the Old Testament, not generally accepted now in the Protestant churches; *Poor Richard's Almanac,* a series of books of information, mottoes and sayings by Benjamin Franklin, published between i732and i757;Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* (1650) and *Holy Dying* (1651), Anglican religious guide books that Eliot admired when she was young; on John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress,* see Chapter XIV, note 2, and his *The Holy War* (1682) is another religious allegory; Nathan (or Nathaniel) Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721), the first dictionary to attempt a list of all the words in the English language; *Valentine and Orson,* an early French romance about two brothers, one brought up as a gentleman, while the other was carried away by a bear and grew up as a wild man, was first translated into English in around 1550 by Henry Watson as the *History of two Valyannte Brethren, Valentyne and Orson,* and remained a hugely popular tale; it is not obvious which history of Babylon Adam might have read.

4. *Where shall I find their like:* Possibly a reminiscence of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601), I.ii.187–8: 'He was a man, take him all in all, / I shall not look upon his like again.'

CHAPTER XX

Adam Visits the Hall Farm

1. *dratchell:* Slut, or 'loose' woman.

2. *Gueldres roses:* An old-fashioned name for *viburnum opulus* which flowers in the spring and early summer.

3. *The very rose-trees… the union of the houses of York and Lancaster:* A longstanding feud between two branches of the English royal family led to the Wars of the Roses, so called because the emblem of the House of Lancaster was a white rose and of the House of York a red one. The conflict came to an end in 1485 with the death of Richard III. His successor Henry Tudor, later Henry VII, a Lancastrian, married Elizabeth of York.

4. *wort:* The boiling infusion of malt or other grain which after fermentation becomes beer.

5. *St Vitus's Dance:* Chorea; a disorder of the face and the limbs where the afflicted person is subject to convulsive and uncontrollable fits. The disease is popularly named after St Vitus to whom a sufferer prayed for a cure.

6. *hollodays:* Holidays.

CHAPTER XXI

The Night-School and the Schoolmaster

1. *thin dips:* Cheap candles made by 'dipping' the wick into tallow.

2. *a well-seasoned meerschaum:* Strictly a Meerschaum-pipe, where the bowl is made of meerschaum, or sepiolite, a hydrous silicate of magnesium which has an appearance like a white clay. The pipe is well-seasoned because it has been used often.

3. *his old soubriquet of 'Brimstone':* His old nickname of Brimstone, a chemical also called saltpetre, which is highly inflammable and associated with the devil.

4. *the old carved oaken press… at a high price in aristocratic houses:* A press is a substantial piece of furniture with a cupboard above and drawers below. Bartle Massey's furniture presumably dates from the seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Eliot makes the point that a heavier style of furniture was popular again by the mid nineteenth century.

5. *friggling:* Fussy, fiddly.

6. *Jacob and Rachel a-kissing one another among the sheep:* See Genesis 29: 10–11 and Chapter III, note 4.

7. *a guinea:* A golden guinea was worth twenty-one silver shillings (one more than an ordinary pound).

8. *'cute:* Acute, discerning.

BOOK THIRD

CHAPTER XXII

Going to the Birthday Feast

1. *the psychology of a canary bird:* One of Eliot's favourite terms of criticism for an empty-headed woman. Cf. *Middlemarch,* Chapter 20, where the narrator considers Mr Casaubon's unexpressed wish that Dorothea might observe 'his abundant pen scratches and amplitude of paper with the uncritical awe of an elegant-minded canary-bird'.

2. *water-nixies, and such lovely things without souls:* Water elves. Another one of Eliot's favoured terms of condemnation for the flighty woman: Rosamund in *Middlemarch* is described as a 'water nixie'.

3. *a rancorous poisoned garment:* When her husband Jason repudiated her in favour of a younger bride, Medea pretended to be reconciled to his plans and sent Creusa a wedding gift of a beautiful garment, but it was poisoned and when Creusa put it on the virulent fabric ate into her flesh. (Medea also killed her sons by Jason.) Another legend tells how Deianeira gave her husband Hercules a garment that she believed was treated with a love potion in the hope of restoring his love for her. It turned out to be poison, and he died.

4. *collogue:* Connive.

5. *Old Harry:* The devil.

6. *in honour of 'th' heir':* Such large celebrations where all the tenants and local farmers were included in the festivities were commonplace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the coming of age of the fifth Duke of Rutland, see Chapter XVI, note 12.

7. *the Benefit Club:* An organization of the local community in order to help each other in sickness or old age. Everyone paid in a regular small subscription and an individual in need could draw on the collective

resource.

8. *the Scotch raybels:* In 1745 the Scottish Jacobite army was led by Charles Edward, the Young Pretender or 'Bonnie Prince Charlie'.

9. *portraits of Queen Elizabeth… his Commentaries in his hand:* Historical portraits of Elizabeth I (1533–1603) and General Monk (1608–70), who led Parliamentary troops during the Civil War, but later went over to the Royalist side; a picture of a biblical scene — Darius, King of Babylon, threw Daniel into a lion's den to test his faith (see Daniel 6:16–24); Julius Caesar (*c*. 102–44 BC) was Consul of Rome and the author of the *Commentarii,* an account of the conquest of Gaul and the Civil War.

10. *it is not only woman's love that is* ἀπέρωτος ἔρως*, as old Æschylus calls it:* A reference to the 'unloving love', that is, a destructive or obsessive love, described in Aeschylus' *Choepho-rae* (Libation bearers), I, 576, the second part of the *oresteia* trilogy. Eliot's copy of *Des Aeschylos Oresteia, Griechisch und Deutsch,* ed. Johannes Franz (Leipzig, 1846) is now in Dr Wil-liams's Library, 14 Gordon Square, London, and this line is marked. See also Wiesenfarth, pp. 149–50.

11. *the old Fogy:* From the adjective 'foggy', fat, bloated or covered with moss. A 'fogy' was an invalid soldier, or one who spent all his time in the garrison. 'Old Fogy' came to be a disrespectful term for anyone holding old-fashioned ideas.

CHAPTER XXIII

Dinner-Time

1. *"Over the hills and far away":* A popular tune dating from the seventeenth century which also appeared, in a re-worked version, as Air XVI in Gay's *Beggar's Opera:* see Chapter XII, note 2.

2. *Give the lads a bagpipes instead of a rattle, and I'll answer for it the corn' 11 be safe:* A rattle was commonly used to scare off birds eating the seed corn in the fields, and Bartle Massey's argument is that the bagpipes are as tuneless as such a rattle. He does not approve of the Scottish. This is partly to do with what Bartle Massey considers as the barbarism of Scotland, and partly with a denigration left over from the Jacobite rebellions of the early eighteenth century in 1715 and 1745.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Health-Drinking

1. *da capo:* From the head, or from the beginning (Italian). A musical term for repetition.

2. *a bailiff… a steward:* A bailiff is someone to look after the farm, but an employee, rather than a tenant who would have leased the farm and thus brought in an income for the squire as he proposed in Chapter XXXII. A steward is the professional manager appointed to look after an estate, its lands and tenancies.

CHAPTER XXV

The Games

1. *the band of the Benefit Club… hornpipes:* The band of local musicians play country dances and sailors' hornpipes.

2. *the grand socialistic idea:* The term 'socialism', advocating the equality of all men, did not become common currency until the earlier part of the nineteenth century when it referred particularly to the theories of writers such as Charles François-Marie Fourier (1772–1837), who published his ideas for social reform in *Théorie des Quatre Mouvements et des Destinées Générales* (1808) and *Le Nouveau Monde Industriel* (1829–30).

3. *'airs from heaven':* Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* I. iv. 41.

4. *an excellent grogram gown and a piece of flannel:* Grogram is a strong coarse cloth made of a mixture of silk, mohair and wool stiffened with gum. Flannel is a thick serviceable material made of wool.

5. *the yearly Wake:* A local annual festival, usually held on the saint's day associated with the parish church.

6. *the 'White Cockade':* A popular Jacobite song. In Robert Burns's version (there are several others), the first verse runs: 'My love was born in Aberdeen, / The bonniest lad that e'vr was seen, / But now he makes our hearts fr' sad, / He takes the Field wi' his white cockade.' The Jacobite soldiers had no formal uniform but wore a white cockade (a knot of ribbons) on a blue bonnet.

7. *the 'Bird Waltz':* There were many tunes of this name in the nineteenth century. The most popular was that by Francis Panormo (1765–1844) which by the 1850s had been through more than forty print issues. This might be seen as one of the anachronisms remarked upon by Eliot's contemporary reviewers, as the waltz did not become a widely popular dance until the 1840s. However, Carol A. Martin points out that here Eliot is directly addressing her readers in the 'realist' mode, treating them as her own 1859 contemporaries (George Eliot, *Adam Bede,* ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 519).

CHAPTER XXVI

The Dance

1. *Christmas boxes:* Tips and presents of money given at Christmas.

BOOK FOURTH

CHAPTER XXIX

The Next Morning

1. *Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds:* A typical moral stand taken by Eliot's narrative persona. Cf., the epigraph to Chapter 4 of *Middlemarch* by Eliot herself:

> *Ist gent* Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves.
> *2nd gent* Ay, truly: but I think it is the world That brings the iron.

2. *Europe adjusts itself to a fait accompli:* Possibly a reference to Louis Napoleon's *coup d'état* in December 1852 which made him Emperor of France. It was later confirmed by a plebiscite, but many felt that his retrospective attention to the wishes of the people was something of a sham. If Eliot is alluding to this event, it figures as one of the anachronisms in the novel.

3. *he war let blood:* Letting blood either through cuts or the use of leeches was a common treatment for ills of all kinds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

CHAPTER XXX

The Delivery of the Letter

1. *'cob-nut':* A game resembling 'conkers' where the filbert nuts (one or more) are threaded on a string and hit against another until one splits. Otherwise the nuts might be piled and shied at from a distance.

2. *Ganymede:* Beautiful young shepherd boy who was carried off by Jupiter (or the Greek Zeus) in the form of an eagle to become cup-bearer to the Gods, serving the nectar which made them immortal. Given that this comparison is rather inappropriate in relation to Adam and Totty, Martin suggests that Eliot may have had a particular image in mind and proposes the statue after Leochares in the Vatican Museum or a

half-size polychrome terracotta of Jupiter and Ganymede in the museum at Olympia (Eliot, *Adam Bede,* ed. Martin, p. 520).

3. *Aristides the Just:* Athenian general and statesman (530?-468? BC), who assessed fairly contributions by states to the Delian league.

4. *vally:* Value.

5. *a state of perfection:* An old Christian idea that John Wesley adapted for Methodism in his book *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as Believed and Taught by the Rev. Mr John Wesley from the Year 172; to 1765* (1767). The knowledge of 'perfection' may come to the individual some time after conversion, but before death. At this point followers reach a state of grace where they are purified from the stain of original sin.

6. *clemmed:* Starved.

7. *to pay the carriage:* Before the introduction of the uniform Penny Post (see Chapter LII, note 6), postage costs were paid by the recipient, not the sender. The rates of such charges depended on the weight of the letter. By the 1830s the cost of receiving a letter sent from Edinburgh to London could be as much as a labourer's day's wages.

8. *the laying up of the manna:* See Exodus 16:14–21. When the Lord sent manna to the people of Israel who were starving in the wilderness, Moses instructed them that they were to eat it that day. However, some disobeyed, and tried to store it, but it went rotten and 'bred worms, and stank' (verse 20).

9. *wherewith the whole creation… the Man of Sorrows:* Romans 8:22. The 'Man of Sorrows' is Christ, whose coming was predicted in Isaiah 53:3: 'He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.'

10. *'If any man… sufficient for the day:* See, for example, Matthew 10:37–8, and 16:24; Matthew 20:22–3; Philippians 4:18 (also Chapter LII); 1 Kings 18:17–40; see Chapter IV, note 10.

11. *There may be some leading here:* Another one of Dinah's ways of accounting for what she sees as the inspiration of God's will or Providence.

CHAPTER XXXI

In Hetty's Bed-Chamber

1. *a gentleman's handwriting:* Hetty might find this hard to read because it would be florid and ornamented, as opposed to the plain copperplate style taught to workmen.

2. *'Let that man… its moorings':* If this is a quotation, it is unidentified.

CHAPTER XXXII

Mrs Poyser 'Has Her Say Out'

1. *misbehave towards her betters, and fly in the face of the catechism:* Part of the response to the Bishop's question 'What is thy duty towards thy Neighbour?' is: 'To order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters.'

2. *'pitching':* Throwing up sheaves of hay with a pitchfork as they are being collected for storage.

3. *a withered crab:* That is, an old crab apple.

4. *palaver:* Persuasiveness, ability to wheedle, cajole or flatter; probably from the Spanish *palavra* for word, speech or talk.

5. *board wage:* A common arrangement in great houses which usually retained a large retinue of staff. When the family were away from home, the servants would have no work to do, and so their wages would be reduced to enough to buy food only. Mrs Poyser is worried that without the squire actually in residence, very little would be required in the way of dairy products for his table.

6. *the plagues o' Egypt:* When Pharaoh refused to allow the enslaved Israelites to leave Egypt, God sent a series of plagues to the land, including one of frogs. See Exodus 8–12.

7. *got the lash i' their hands, for want o' knowing how t' undo the tackle:* The 'lash' is a whip, and the 'tackle' is the bridle and reins that harness the horse or oxen. Mrs Poyser may be alluding to the institution of slavery which was a hotly contested topic in the 1790s.

8. *two-three old folks as you think o' saving your soul by giving 'em a bit o' flannel and a drop o' porridge:* The squire has perhaps built some almshouses or gives charity to some of the elderly poor in the parish. Mrs Poyser is thinking of the ancient practice which gave its name to the 'almshouse' where the gentry would provide for impoverished persons in return for prayers offered up for the donor's welfare.

CHAPTER XXXIII

More Links

1. *the harvest suppers:* To celebrate and give thanks for the safe bringing in of the harvest. Traditionally a country custom where all the labourers were treated to a feast. See Chapter LIII.

2. *'Bony' was come back from Egypt… French in Italy:* Bonaparte (see Chapter I, note 2).

3. *an Æsop's fable:* Aesop (about the middle of the sixth century bc) was said to be the inventor of a series of fables which pointed morals for human life, including such famous stories as 'The Tortoise and the Hare', 'The Fox and the Grapes' and 'The Man and the Lion'.

4. *the cheapening of bricks per thousand by water-carriage:* Bricks were expensive to make because of their firing ovens, and, because they were so heavy to carry, their cost went up even further when transport was added, but the new network of canals carrying industrial goods by water meant that many items were reduced in price (see Chapter I, note 16).

CHAPTER XXXIV

The Betrothal

1. *I never sell a fowl but what's plucked:* Mrs Poyser collects feathers from her chickens to provide the stuffing for quilts for the winter.

2. *Christian folks can't be married like cuckoos:* Cuckoos are the most obvious in their distinctive mating calls, which sound is popularly taken as signalling the arrival of spring. Folk traditions ascribe lascivious and promiscuous habits to the bird, in part associated with its well-known appropriation of other birds' nests for laying its eggs.

CHAPTER XXXV

The Hidden Dread

1. *I'll be as still as th' ould tabby,… do aught but the offal work:* Lisbeth promises to placate Hetty by keeping quiet like an old tabby cat and only doing the harder jobs.

2. *something by the roadside… the agony of the Cross:* Crucifix statues are frequently found at crossroads in France, Germany and Italy.

3. *She has thought of this pool often in the nights:* In the mid nineteenth century it was very common for women to commit suicide by drowning. All too frequently the reason for their despair was the fact that they were pregnant with an illegitimate child. So familiar was this circumstance that the words 'Found Drowned' often posted on police notices were enough for a contemporary audience in the 1850s to be able to surmise the situation. See Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

BOOK FIFTH

CHAPTER XXXVI

The Journey in Hope

1. *she must trust to carriers' carts or slow waggons:* The regular coach routes were prohibitively dear. So Hetty has to hitch lifts with carriers (see Chapter XI, note 2) or hope that a farm wagon might pick her up.

2. *Windsor… it's where the king lives:* At Windsor Castle, one of the main royal residences. This may indicate a slight anachronism. It was not until after 1804 that George III made the castle an important residence for his family of thirteen children. From 1811 he was confined to his apartments there as his deranged state worsened.

3. *poor-rates:* A local tax levied by the parish to pay for the running of the workhouse.

4. *milestone:* Marked the distances between major towns and were an important feature of the English countryside.

5. *a drunken postilion, — who frightened her by driving like Jehu the son of Nimshi:* Jehu drove 'furiously' (2 Kings 9:20). This journey would have been cheaper because the chaise had made the timetabled journey to its destination with paying passengers, and was now returning to base. This also explains why the postilion, who rode one of the horses but also was the sole driver, was in this unfit state, as he had clearly been relaxing after his official journey.

6. *Stratford-on-Avon… Stony Stratford:* In Warwickshire and Buckinghamshire, respectively. Stony Stratford is an ancient coaching town on the Roman road called Watling Street, near Milton Keynes now. Hetty has gone fifty to sixty miles out of her way.

7. *toll-gates:* Each stretch of road was owned privately, and a toll was levied at points to pay for the upkeep. (Bridges were similarly owned and subject to such tolls.)

8. *the Green Man in Windsor:* A coaching inn, and a popular name for public houses set in wooded districts.

9. *the Loamshire Militia's gone to Ireland:* During the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, nationalist dissidents in Ireland sometimes threw in their lot with the French. Arthur's volunteer regiment would have been sent to Ireland to suppress threats of rebellion.

CHAPTER XXXVII

The journey in Despair

1. *taken to the parish:* That is, taken to the workhouse in her own parish.

2. *her pocket:* Hetty would have had a detachable pocket for her valuables, which could be tied or buttoned into her dress or petticoats.

3. *have had godfathers… to church every Sunday:* Eliot marks out the rituals of a life in the Anglican church. At the time of Christening chosen friends would stand as godparents for the child, charged with being responsible for their Christian upbringing. During her childhood she would have learnt the catechism,

and the tenets of the Anglican faith set out in the Book of Common Prayer. In youth she would have been confirmed in the faith.

4. *that wondrous Medusa-face:* In Greek legend Medusa, one of the three Gorgons, had her hair turned into snakes as punishment for defiling the temple of Athene, and her terrifying gaze turned men to stone. She was slain by Perseus, who set her head into his shield. Later artistic representations of Medusa tended to portray her face as a death-mask. Eliot may have had in mind here the sculpture known as the Rondanini Medusa which she saw at the Munich Glyptothek Museum *(Letters,* II, 451 and 460). In her notebook Eliot copied out a passage about Medusa from Adolf Stahn's *Torso. Kunst, Künstler und Kunst werk den Alten,* 2 vols. (Brunswick, 1854), vol. 1, pp. 314–15. She reviewed *Torso* three times, and in 'The Art of the Ancients', *Leader, 6* (1855), pp. 257–8, she referred to 'the terrible beauty of the Medusa Rondanini'. See Wiesenfarth, pp. 130, 148–9.

5. *The pool had its wintry depth now:* The winter rains had filled up the pool which would be shallower in the drought of summer.

6. *a hovel of furze:* A makeshift hut of woody brush and undergrowth designed to provide a shelter for animals.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

The Quest

1. *a shadder:* A shadow.

2. *Dark and cheerless… the perfect day:* Hymn by Charles Wesley, which begins 'Christ, whose glory fills the skies.'

3. *getting the roads made good in his own district:* Since roads belonged to individuals or companies (see Chapter XXXVI, note 7), Adam hopes to persuade Arthur to invest in improving the local roads.

4. *like th' angels in the desert, to strengthen them as ha' got nothing t' eat:* Possibly a reference to the manna delivered to the children of Israel (see Chapter XXX, note 8), or an allusion to Christ's temptation during forty days and nights in the wilderness when angels came to strengthen him against the temptations of the devil (Matthew 4:11).

5. *potato-ground:* A plot for growing vegetables.

6. *a slow palsied shake of the head:* An involuntary twitch associated with palsy or a stroke.

7. *feature him:* Look like him.

8. *meeting:* The Methodist service. A common term for any gathering of Nonconformists for the purpose of worship.

9. *'taxed cart':* During the wars at the end of the eighteenth century the Prime Minister William Pitt was forced to be inventive in ways of raising money to pay for them. In 1794 he introduced a tax on carriage horses and in 1795 one on open carts drawn by one horse. Each cart bore the sign 'A taxed Cart' and the owner's name and address.

10. *the Society:* A name for the Methodist group.

11. *his spud:* A sharp narrow spade.

CHAPTER XXXIX

The Tidings

1. *it was almost like relief or joy:* Irwine has feared that Adam was responsible for Hetty's pregnancy.

CHAPTER XL

The Bitter Waters Spread

1. *Bitter Waters:* A reference to the bitter waters of Marah encountered by the children of Israel during their exile in the wilderness (Exodus 15:23).

2. *Hetty would persist to the end in her obstinate silence:* Much effort would have been put into persuading an unmarried mother to confess the name of the father of her child.

3. *the Lent assizes:* In country areas temporary courts were set up three times a year and travelling judges would hear all the cases of the most serious crimes that had accrued in the interval.

4. *St Thomas's:* Most likely the Feast of St Thomas the Apostle (3 July).

5. *Sarah Williamson, Methodist preacher, Leeds:* Presumably the unnamed 'holy woman who preaches' at Leeds (p. 101). She may have been based on the Methodist preacher Sarah Crosby (see Chapter VIII, note 4).

CHAPTER XLI

The Eve of the Trial

1. *An upper room:* This scene is designed to echo the events of the Last Supper, when Christ met his disciples in an 'upper room' (Mark 14:15, Luke 22:12), had bread and wine, and acknowledged the imminence of Judas's betrayal.

2. *Men's lives are as thoroughly blended:* With Adam, Irwine takes up the responsible moral role that he had abjured in not tackling Arthur about his anxieties in Chapter XVI. This thesis on the connectedness of social life was taken up again in *Middlemarch.*

CHAPTER XLIII

The Verdict

1. *The place fitted up that day as a court of justice:* The temporary courtroom chosen for the hearing of the Lent assizes.

2. *for a public, because there was a figure against the door:* It was customary well into the nineteenth century for public houses, inns and shops to advertise with a statuette or sign of some kind: tobacconists displayed a red Indian, marine stores a black doll, and public houses might have a man drinking or the figure of a black boy acting as a hitching post for the horses of the customers.

3. *after Meeting was over, and speak to our minister:* Hetty seems to have been looked after by a dissenter, not a member of the Church of England.

4. *the fever:* Puerperal fever, a form of blood poisoning, common in newly delivered mothers, and often fatal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5. *the coppice to look after some stakes:* Coppicing was a common practice when wood was an important source of fuel, where young trees were pruned regularly to encourage new growth.

6. *the constable:* The overseer of the parish (not a police constable).

7. *her own counsel… a favour not granted to criminals in those stern times:* In the eighteenth century accused

felons were not permitted representation by 'counsel'. They were allowed to seek advice on points of law, but if they wished to question the evidence or put forward a defence they had to do that themselves. See J. M. Beattie, 'Scales of Justice: Defense Counsel and the English Criminal Trial in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Law and History Review,* 9:2 (Autumn 1991), pp. 221–67. (The jury would of course all have been men.)

8. *the judge put on his black cap, and the chaplain in his canonicals:* Thus the courtroom knows the sentence before it is pronounced. The judge covers his wig with a black cap and the chaplain wears his full robes of canonical office.

CHAPTER XLIV

Arthur's Return

1. *the lay-impropriator of the Hayslope tithes:* A secular official whose job it was to collect tithes and then to calculate payment to the clergy.

CHAPTER XLV

In the Prison

1. *the condemned cell:* Prisoners condemned to die were confined alone.

2. *his pardoning mercy can't reach you… from sin:* The idea that God's forgiveness relies upon the repentance of the sinner.

3. *the cry of the forsaken:* 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' were the words of Jesus spoken in Hebrew on the cross (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34).

4. *him who denied thee:* Christ prophesied that Peter, his chief disciple, would deny him three times before dawn. So he did, but Christ forgave him (see Luke 22:61).

5. *as they of old brought the sick… thou didst heal them:* See Matthew 4:24.

6. *God… to whom the darkness is as noonday:* See Isaiah 58:10.

7. *the eleventh hour: See Matthew 20:6 and* 9.

8. *I see thee… with healing on thy wings:* See Malachi 4:2.

9. *let the eyes of the blind be opened:* See Isaiah 35:5.

10. *'Father, I have sinned':* The formula for the beginning of confession, as well the words of the returning Prodigal Son according to Christ's parable (Luke 15:18).

11. *like a heavy weight hanging round my neck:* Specifically a reference to Christ's words on children, 'But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he drowned in the depth of the sea' (Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2). But also like the albatross to the mariner in Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner': see Chapter V, note 30.

CHAPTER XLVI

The Hours of Suspense

1. *The people were… moving rapidly, in one direction:* Executions were held in public up until the first half of the nineteenth century, and were a popular draw for the crowd, especially when the victim was young

and pretty.

CHAPTER XLVII

The Last Moment

1. *let us pray without ceasing to God:* See 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

2. *The Sheriff:* The Sheriff of the County, a legal officer, who would be responsible for seeing that executions were carried out according to the jurisdiction of the law.

CHAPTER XLVIII

Another Meeting in the Wood

1. *transported o'er the seas:* From the early eighteenth century it was the practice of several European countries to transport criminals to their colonies to serve their sentence. People went from England to America, and from 1787 to Australia. Conditions on board the transport ships were degrading and unsanitary, and many convicts died on the journey, while many more died before the completion of their sentence. Women especially suffered as they were at the mercy of both their gaolers and their fellow prisoners. Even if they were assigned to domestic or farm work on arrival in the colony they were likely to suffer harsh treatment and abuse. (Transportation was abolished in 1868.) See Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787–1868* (1986; London: Harvill Panther, 1996).

2. *If I die, my cousin Tradgett will have the estate, and take my name:* As he is unmarried and an only child, Arthur has no heirs, and his death will mean that his family line would die out. His cousin (on the female side) would take on the family name.

BOOK SIXTH

CHAPTER XLIX

At the Hall Farm

1. *the Sermon on the Mount:* Matthew 5–7, includes the passage beginning, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.' Later on, Christ's advice also includes examples of the practice of humility: 'whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also' (Matthew 5:39–40).

2. *cas'alty:* Casualty, that is, infirm, shaky, liable to accident.

3. *a monthly rose:* Possibly a name for the briar or wild rose which is a very pale pink and which only blooms for about a month in the summer.

4. *the chaff-cutter:* The man who chops up the stalks, or chaff, left after the harvesting of the ears of wheat or corn, in order to make straw.

5. *asthmy:* Asthma.

CHAPTER L

In the Cottage

1. *the close poke of her little black bonnet:* The poke is the brim of Dinah's round bonnet. The poke-bonnet style was associated with the dress adopted by Quakers and Methodists.

2. *peace soon, though nobody believes it'll last long:* Britain and France made peace under the Treaty of Amiens in March 1802, but hostilities resumed in May 1803.

3. *That meeting between the brothers… timid and distrustful:* In Genesis 32–3 Jacob tricked his elder brother Esau out of his inheritance by impersonating him, and when the two brothers were to meet again twenty years later, Jacob feared that his reception would not be warm but Esau 'ran to meet him, and embraced him' (33:4).

4. *Moses… died when other folks were going to reap the fruits:* Moses successfully led the children of Israel through the wilderness and to the sanctuary of the Promised Land, but dies in sight of it (Deuteronomy 34: 1–5).

5. *Wesley's abridgment of Madame Guy on's life:* Madame Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Motte Guyon (1648–1717), French Roman Catholic mystic. John Wesley published *An Extract of the Life of Madame Guion* (1776), which is referred to in Moore's *Life of Mrs Mary Fletcher* (see Chapter VIII, note 4).

6. *the precepts of Solomon:* On the training of children, see Proverbs 13:24 and 22:6. The book is traditionally supposed to have been written by Solomon.

7. *the gallant Colonel Bath unmanly when he made the gruel for his invalid sister:* In Henry Fielding's *Amelia* (1751), Book III, Chapter VIII, the not-very-attractive character of Colonel Bath — famous for his sharp tongue — is embarrassed to be found in the act of preparing a posset for his sister.

8. *dilettante scouring and polishing:* The strict meaning of *dilettante* is to be passionately devoted to something. So here, to cleaning.

9. *Moses, the meekest of men, was wrathful sometimes:* Numbers 12:3: 'very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth'. Nonetheless Moses did lose his temper with the Israelites' lack of faith — especially when he found them worshipping the golden calf.

10. *be with one another in spirit… the flesh is weak:* See 1 Corinthians 5:3; 1 Peter 1:6; John 7:33; Ezekiel 21:13; Matthew 26:41 ('the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak' — words from the prayer Jesus uttered in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest).

CHAPTER LI

Sunday Morning

1. *have no will but thine:* Cf. Luke 22:42: 'not my will, but thine, be done'.

2. *Samuel's dying speech… Adam knew the Articles:* See 1 Samuel 12; Genesis 27:1–40; Apochryphal Ecclesiasticus (Sirach). The Thirty-Nine Articles of Faith are included in the Book of Common Prayer. Adam disagrees with Article 6, as it states that while the Church sanctions the reading of the Apochryphal books 'for example of life and instruction in manners', it does not regard them as canonical and 'doth not apply them to establish any doctrine'.

3. *'I came not… to repentance':* Mark 2:17 and Luke 5:32.

4. *Mrs Fletcher:* See Chapter VIII, note 4.

5. *without book:* Without knowledge or authority, originally scriptural authority, but here generally.

CHAPTER LII

Adam and Dinah

1. *I fear I should forget the Divine presence, and seek no love but yours:* An interesting echo of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Chapter 24: 'My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature of whom I had made an idol.'

2. *marriage is a holy state:* From the introductory words of the marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer ('Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the sight of God, and in the face of the congregation to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate…').

3. *that better part:* As in the story of Martha and Mary (Chapter VI, note 9), 'Mary hath chosen that good part', Luke 10:42.

4. *an earthly affection… a lover of self:* See Colossians 3:2; 2 Timothy 3:1–2.

5. *that early blessedness which I had forsaken:* Cf. William Cowper's poem 'Walking with God (Genesis, v. 24)', often sung as a hymn, 'O! for a closer walk with God'. The second verse begins 'Where is the blessedness I knew/When first I saw the Lord?' It was first published in *Olney Hymns* by John Newton and William Cowper (1779).

6. *the boat, gliding sleepily along the canal… post-time:* The narrator contrasts the ways of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the innovations of the 18 50s. A complicated network of canals was built (see Chapter I, note 16) and products were transported in this economic way, as opposed to pack-horses, and door-to-door pedlars. The invention of the steam engine meant that mechanized manufacturing supplanted the spinning wheel, and eventually gave rise to the development of the railway network which, in its turn, made the canals obsolete. By the 1850s there was great interest in education and many museums had been founded and periodicals established to provide for the interests of the growing middle classes. In the eighteenth century a tax on paper meant that there were fewer newspapers from which to choose, but by the 1850s there were several prominent newspapers competing for readers with opinionated 'leaders' on the political questions of the day. And finally, in the 1840s the Uniform Penny Post had been introduced, making the sending of letters not only cheaper (see Chapter XXX, note 7) but more regular, with city dwellers having two, if not three, postal deliveries a day.

7. *Exeter Hall… Sartor Resartus:* Exeter Hall in London was identified with Evangelist philosophies and was often the venue chosen by radical religious thinkers in the nineteenth century including such men as Edward Irving (1792–1834), who established the dissenting Holy Catholic Apostolic Church in 1832, and the preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–92), who filled it to capacity when he preached there in 1854. Eliot read his sermons in September 1858 *(Letters,* II, 478) and eventually heard him speak in 1870 when she described his tone as the 'most superficial, Grocer's-back-parlour view of Calvinistic Christianity' *(Letters,* V, 121–2.).

   Tracts for the Times was a series of ninety influential pamphlets (1833–41) written by a group of Oxford High Church men led by John Henry Newman, called the 'Oxford Movement'. Their endeavours were part of an effort to challenge the secularization of the Anglican Church. As a young woman Eliot borrowed some copies from the local squire in Warwickshire (Haight, *George Eliot,* p. 24).
   Sartor Resartus (The Tailor Refashioned) (1833–4) by Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), part autobiography, part social criticism condemning the materialism of the age. Eliot admired his writings and sent her first two books to his wife Jane Carlyle in the hopes that her husband would read them.

CHAPTER LIII

The Harvest Supper

1. *Harvest Home:* See Chapter XXXIII, note 1.

2. *the plum-pudding:* Here a savoury dish, served before the meat. The equivalent today is the practice of serving Yorkshire pudding and gravy before the beef.

3. *'Tom Saft':* Or 'Soft', as in 'soft in the head'.

4. *thatched the ricks:* The newly harvested crops would be stored in ricks and then thatched over in order to keep the rain off.

5. *Tityrus and Melibœus:* Two shepherds introduced in Virgil's (70–19 bc) first *Eclogue.* Tityrus is a generalized name for a shepherd and he also appears in Theocritus (see Chapter V, note 37).

6. *the treadmill… the House of Correction:* Persons convicted of minor crimes would be sentenced to a spell in the House of Correction and condemned to hard labour; picking oakum, that is tar, off ropes; breaking stones; or walking on the treadmill grinding corn.

7. *ad libitum:* A musical term; the performer is at liberty to sing the passage freely as regards rhythm or tempo.

8. *Here's a health… our master's will:* A drinking song which would be repeated for several verses as each person is named and their health drunk by the assembled company.

9. *"M loove's a roos wi'out a thorn":* 'The Lass of Richmond Hill' (*c.* 1790) by James Hook (1746–1827): 'On Richmond Hill there lives a Lass, / More bright than May-day morn, / Whose charms all other maids surpass, / A rose without a thorn'. Perhaps a glancing reference to the plot here. Some sources suggest the song was about the longstanding, cross-class relationship between the Prince of Wales and Mrs Fitzherbert.

10. *the mounseers… as if they war frogs:* The French ('monsieurs'), whom English prejudice derogates as French 'frogs'.

11. *ne'er ate a bit o' beef i' their lives. Mostly sallet:* The eating of beef is proof of manly British virtue as opposed to an effeminate French preference for salad.

12. *furriners:* Foreigners.

13. *If King George 'ud turn 'em all away… He might take on Billy Pitt:* As a constitutional monarch, King George III was obliged to defer to the wishes of Parliament, but his insanity (see Chapter V, note 32) meant that he relied on ministers appointed by the Crown to make political decisions. William Pitt the Younger (1759–1806) was Prime Minister for seventeen years up until March 1801 when he fell from power. (He did return again as Prime Minister in May 1804.)

14. *which is Old Harry when everybody's got boots on:* The Devil traditionally has cloven hoofs.

15. *he's no Frenchman born:* Napoleon was born in Ajaccio on the island of Corsica, off the coast of Italy.

16. *thrust his forefinger into the canister:* Of tobacco.

17. *'Three Merry Mowers':* Another popular song.

CHAPTER LIV

The Meeting on the Hill

1. *a man with a cataract to regret the painful process… exchanged for clear outline:* A reference to the blind man's description of his partly restored sight when Jesus laid hands on him: see Mark 8:24. Cataracts could be removed by surgery in the nineteenth century, but it was performed without anaesthetic.

2. *till death parts us:* A reference to the words of the marriage service as included in the Book of Common Prayer: 'till death do us part'.

CHAPTER LV

Marriage Bells

1. *'Oh what a joyful thing it is'… the wedding psalm:* Either Psalm 128 in the Bible or 67 in the Book of Common Prayer.

EPILOGUE

1. *Conference has forbid the women preaching:* In July 1803 the annual Conference and legislative meeting of the Methodist clergy and lay-preachers considered the matter of women preaching. The decision was that women 'in general' should not preach, 'But if any woman among us think she has an extraordinary call from God to speak in public… we are of the opinion she should, in general, address *her own sex,* and *those only.'* See *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences from the first, held in London, by the late Rev. John Wesley, A. M. in the year 1774* (1813), vol. II, p. 188. In the early nineteenth century there was a general reactionary movement throughout Europe with regard to women's rights. Some Methodists, such as the Primitive Methodists, still endorsed women preachers and Eliot's Aunt Elizabeth Evans joined them.

[1.] It was in 1839.

2. 18 June 1840, when GE and her father spent the night with Samuel Evans at Wirksworth (Robert Evans's Journal).

3. 30 April-4 May 1842 (Robert Evans's Journal).

4. 30 May 1858 (GHL's Journal).

5. Ch. XXVI. They left Munich 6 July 1858 (GHL's Journal).

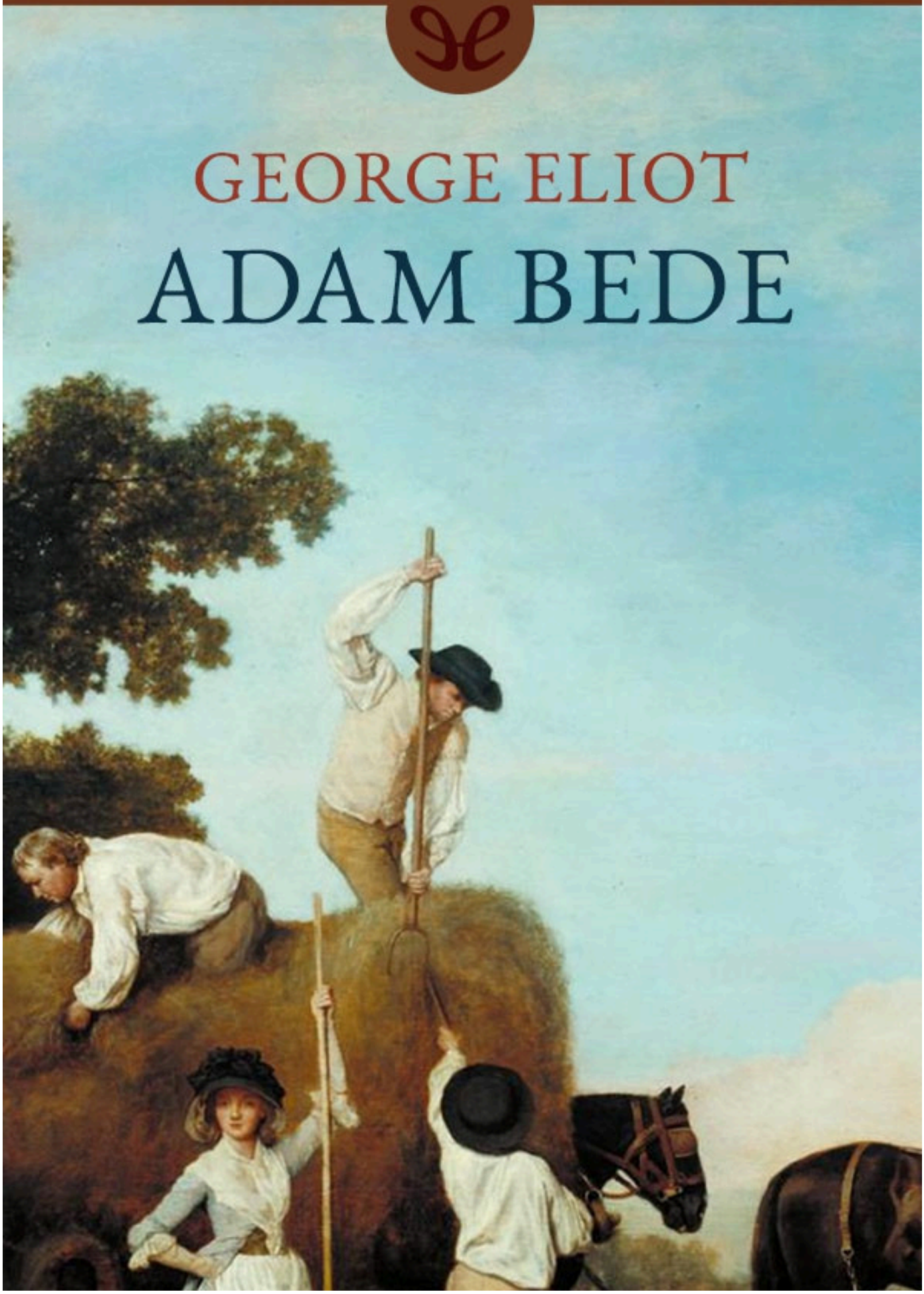
6. Ch. XXXVI.

7. Chs. VI and XXVII.

* She had besides a little boy in breeches, and it is surprising she has not mentioned him in her declaration; possibly she had some reason for it.

GEORGE ELIOT

ADAM BEDE



Adam Bede es el intenso y minucioso retrato de un mundo de gentes humildes, campesinos, obreros, seres que viven con fidelidad una vida oculta. Es también la historia de un joven apuesto y con las ideas muy claras, que sin saberlo se ve inmerso en un torbellino de pasiones que difícilmente consigue controlar con su férrea voluntad. Y también es la crítica del ideal femenino de la época, centrado sólo en la belleza de las mujeres. En esta novela, George Eliot rechaza con un fino sentido del humor la clasificación de buenos y malos propia de la literatura victoriana, pues si nos compadecemos de la pobre y coqueta Hetty, no llegamos a aborrecer nunca al seductor Arthur, y a veces la entereza y el sentido de la justicia de Adam nos resultan irritantes.

George Eliot

Adam Bede

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A fin de que puedas tener
claras imágenes ante tus alegres ojos
del generoso bosque bajo de la naturaleza
y de las flores que viven en la sombra. Y cuando
hablo de eso entre la grey que se ha desviado de su camino
o que ha caído, solamente serán separados
aquellos cuyo error o desliz necesite algo más
que indulgencia fraternal.

WORDSWORTH

LIBRO PRIMERO

I

El taller

Utilizando una sola gota de tinta a guisa de espejo, el mago egipcio se dispone a revelar, a cualquier cliente casual, lejanas visiones del pasado. Esto mismo es lo que me dispongo a hacer por ti, lector. Con esta gota de tinta en la punta de mi pluma, te mostraré el espacioso taller del señor Jonathan Burge, carpintero y constructor, en el pueblo de Hayslope, según aparecía el día 18 de junio del año de Nuestro Señor 1799.

El sol de la tarde daba calor a los cinco obreros que estaban ocupados en construir puertas y marcos de ventana, así como entablados. El olor de la madera de pino, procedente de un montón de tablones dispuestos en forma de tienda que había junto a la puerta abierta, se confundía con el aroma de los saúcos que extendían su nieve estival junto a la ventana abierta del lado opuesto; los inclinados rayos del sol atravesaban las virutas transparentes que surgían ante el laborioso cepillo, y hacían brillar el fino grano de un panel de roble apoyado contra la pared. En un montón de aquellas blandas virutas había hecho su agradable cama un perro pastor, de pelaje gris y rudo, que estaba tendido con el hocico entre las patas anteriores, frunciendo alguna vez las cejas al dirigir una mirada hacia el más alto de los cinco obreros, que tallaba un escudo en el centro de un panel de chimenea. A este obrero pertenecía la fuerte voz que dominaba los ruidos del cepillo y del martillo cantando:

Despierta, alma mía, y con el sol
empieza tu deber diario;
sacude toda pereza…

Se interrumpió ante la necesidad de tomar unas medidas con mayor atención, y la voz sonora se convirtió en leve silbido; mas luego se dejó oír otra vez con redoblado vigor:

Haz que tus palabras sean sinceras
y tu conciencia clara como el mediodía.

Tal voz podía proceder solamente de un pecho amplio, y éste pertenecía a un hombre de huesos bien desarrollados y cubiertos de excelentes músculos, de un metro ochenta de altura, de espalda recta y cabeza tan bien equilibrada que, al incorporarse para examinar su trabajo desde alguna distancia, tenía el aspecto de un soldado en posición de descansen. Con los brazos arremangados hasta más arriba del codo, mostraba unos músculos dignos de alcanzar el primer premio en un concurso de fuerza; sin embargo, la larga y esbelta mano, con las yemas de los dedos bastante anchas, parecía más apropiada para las tareas de destreza. Adam Bede, con su cuerpo alto y fornido, era sajón y tenía aspecto de tal; pero el cabello, de color negro azabache, resultaba más notable por su contraste con el gorro de papel delgado y la mirada aguda de los ojos oscuros que brillaban bajo unas cejas muy marcadas, prominentes y móviles, lo cual indicaba que por sus venas corría también alguna sangre celta. El rostro era grande, de facciones poco delicadas, y en su actitud de reposo no tenía otra belleza que la expresión propia de un semblante inteligente, honrado y alegre.

Con toda evidencia, el obrero que estaba a su lado era hermano de Adam. Tenía casi su misma estatura, el mismo tipo de facciones, igual color del cabello y de la piel; pero el parecido familiar hacía aún más

visible la notable diferencia de expresión, tanto en la figura como en el rostro. Los anchos hombros de Seth estaban ligeramente encorvados; sus ojos eran grises, las cejas menos prominentes y más apacibles que las de su hermano, y su mirada, en vez de aguda, era confiada y benigna. Se quitó el gorro de papel, y así pudo verse que no tenía el cabello grueso y lacio como el de Adam, sino fino y ondulado, de manera que permitía discernir el contorno exacto del arco coronal que predominaba muy decididamente sobre el semblante.

Los vagabundos tenían siempre la certeza de que recibirían una moneda de cobre de Seth; pero, en cambio, apenas se atrevían a dirigir la palabra a Adam.

El concierto de las herramientas y de la voz de Adam fue interrumpido al fin por Seth, quien, levantando la puerta en la que había estado trabajando intensamente, la dejó apoyada en la pared y dijo:

—Bueno, hoy ya he terminado mi puerta.

Los obreros levantaron los ojos; Jim Salt, corpulento individuo de pelo rojo conocido por el apodo de Sandy Jim, interrumpió su labor con el cepillo, y Adam, dirigiendo una mirada de intensa sorpresa a Seth, le dijo:

—¡Cómo! ¿Te figuras que ya la has terminado?

—Sin duda —contestó Seth sorprendido a su vez—. ¿Qué le falta?

Un coro de carcajadas de los otros tres obreros obligó a Seth a mirar muy confuso a su alrededor. Adam no tomó parte en la hilaridad general, pero en su rostro hubo una leve sonrisa y, en un tono más suave que antes, observó:

—¿No ves que te has olvidado de los paneles?

Estalló de nuevo la risa cuando Seth se llevó las manos a la cabeza y se ruborizó intensamente.

—¡Hurra! —gritó un individuo pequeño y flexible llamado Wiry Ben, adelantándose para coger la puerta —. La colgaremos en el extremo del taller con un cartel que diga: «Obra de Seth Bede, el metodista». Oye, Jim, trae el pote de la pintura roja.

—Callaos —dijo Adam—, y tú, Ben Cranage, déjale en paz. No me extrañaría que te ocurriera algo así el día menos pensado. Entonces no tendrás tantas ganas de reírte.

—Me gustará que me lo digas, Adam. Y eso me ocurrirá mucho antes de tener la cabeza llena de tonterías metodistas —replicó Ben.

—Pero a veces la tienes llena de bebida, lo cual es peor.

Mientras tanto, Ben había tomado el pote de pintura roja y se disponía a empezar su inscripción, dibujando en el aire una o a modo de prueba.

—Déjale en paz, ¿quieres? —Adam abandonó sus herramientas para acercarse a Ben y cogerlo por el hombro derecho—. Déjale en paz, o te sacudiré de lo lindo.

Ben se estremeció bajo la presión de las manos de hierro de Adam; pero, como hombrecito valeroso que era, no parecía dispuesto a desistir. Con la mano izquierda tomó el pincel, que empuñaba en la impotente derecha, e hizo un movimiento como si se dispusiera a pintar las letras con la izquierda. Un momento después Adam le hizo dar media vuelta, lo cogió por el otro hombro y, empujándolo, lo sujetó contra la pared. Entonces habló Seth:

—Suéltale, Adam. Ben sólo quería bromear. La verdad es que tiene derecho a reírse de mí, y aun yo mismo no puedo evitar reírme de mi tontería.

—No lo soltaré hasta que prometa dejar en paz la puerta —dijo Adam.

—Vamos, Ben —dijo Seth en tono persuasivo—. No vayamos a tener una pelea por esta causa. Ya sabes que a Adam le gusta salirse con la suya. Te resultaría más fácil dar la vuelta a un carro en un callejón estrecho. Dile que vas a dejar la puerta, y olvidémoslo.

—Adam no me asusta —dijo Ben—. Pero puesto que tú me lo pides, Seth, no tengo inconveniente en prometerlo.

—Así me gusta, Ben —exclamó Adam riéndose y aflojando la presión de sus manos.

Todos reanudaron sus trabajos, pero Wiry Ben, que había llevado la peor parte en la pugna física, parecía dispuesto a compensar tal humillación con el éxito que pudiera alcanzar gracias a sus sarcasmos.

—¿En qué pensabas, Seth? —empezó diciendo—. ¿Tenías la mente ocupada por el precioso rostro de la predicadora o por su sermón? ¿Cuál de las dos cosas te hizo olvidar el panel?

—Más valdría que me acompañases a oírla, Ben —replicó Seth con tono afable—. Esta noche va a predicar en el parque; tal vez entonces podrías pensar un poco más en ti mismo, en vez de perder el tiempo con esas canciones inmorales que tanto te complacen. Podrías tener un poco de religión, y eso sería la mayor y mejor ganancia que hicieras en tu vida.

—Ya vendrá el tiempo de eso, Seth. Pensaré en ello cuando quiera establecerme en la vida; a los solteros nos importan poco esas ganancias. Quizás podré cortejar a una mujer y a la religión a un mismo tiempo,

siguiendo tu ejemplo, Seth; y seguramente no querrás que me convierta y me interponga entre ti y la hermosa predicadora para acabar conquistándola yo.

—No temas, Ben; estoy seguro de que ni tú ni yo podremos conquistarla. Lo único que debes hacer es ir a escuchar sus sermones. Entonces ya no volverás a hablar de ella tan a la ligera.

—Casi me dan ganas de ir esta noche, si no encuentro buena compañía en el Holly Bush. ¿Qué tema ha elegido para su sermón? Sin duda será: «¿Qué habéis venido a ver? ¿Una profetisa? También os digo, y más que profetisa». En todo caso, tú podrías repetirme el sermón, Seth, si yo no llegase a tiempo.

—Mira, Ben —dijo Adam con cierta severidad—, deja en paz las palabras de la Biblia, porque te estás pasando.

—¡Cómo! ¿Te molesta lo que he dicho, Adam? Hace muy poco tiempo eras totalmente contrario a que las mujeres predicasen.

—No es que haya cambiado —replicó Adam—. No he dicho una palabra acerca de las mujeres predicadoras, sólo te he rogado que dejaras en paz la Biblia. Vale más que te dediques a leer ese libro humorístico del que tan orgulloso estás, y que no te ocupes de otra cosa.

—Veo que te estás volviendo tan santo como el mismo Seth. No me extrañaría nada que esta noche quisieras predicar. Estoy seguro de que harás muy buen papel iniciando los cánticos. De todos modos, me gustaría saber lo que dirá el párroco de Irwine en cuanto sepa que su gran favorito Adam Bede se está convirtiendo al metodismo.

—Mira, mejor será que me dejes en paz, Ben. No soy más metodista que tú mismo, y estoy seguro de que tú, en cambio, te convertirás en algo peor. El párroco Irwine tiene el suficiente buen sentido para no intervenir en lo que la gente pueda hacer en asuntos de religión. Es algo que les atañe a ellos y a Dios, según me ha repetido varias veces.

—Sí, sí. Pero, de todos modos, no le gustan mucho los disidentes.

—Es posible. Por mi parte, no tengo ninguna afición a la cerveza espesa de Josh Tod, mas no por eso te impido que te vuelvas tonto bebiéndola.

Hubo una carcajada general al oír esta réplica de Adam, pero Seth añadió muy serio:

—No, no, Adam. No conviene comparar nunca la religión con la cerveza espesa. No hay por qué creer que los disidentes y los metodistas no sean tan dignos de respeto como los que asisten a la iglesia.

—No creas, Seth, que me río de la religión, sea de quien sea. Que cada uno siga los dictados de su conciencia y ya está. De todos modos, me parece que sería mejor que inclinasen sus conciencias a permanecer fíeles a la iglesia, pues allí hay que aprender mucho. Es preciso tener en cuenta algo más que el espíritu, pues hay otras muchas cosas aparte del Evangelio. Fíjate en los canales, en los acueductos, en las máquinas que se emplean en las minas de carbón y en las fábricas de hilados que hay en Cromford; el hombre debe aprender algo más que el Evangelio para poder ganarse la vida. En cambio, he oído decir a algunos de los predicadores que el hombre no ha de hacer nada más que cerrar los ojos y contemplar lo que ocurre en su interior. A mi juicio debemos guardar en nuestra alma el amor a Dios y las palabras divinas de la Biblia. Pero ¿qué dice la Biblia? Pues que Dios puso su espíritu en el obrero que construía el tabernáculo, a fin de que ejecutase el trabajo de talla y las demás cosas que requerían una mano hábil. Este es, pues, mi modo de ver las cosas; creo que el espíritu de Dios está en todo y en todos los tiempos, en cualquier día de la semana y también en el domingo; así como en las grandes obras e invenciones, en los cálculos y en las máquinas. Y Dios nos ayuda dándonos la cabeza y las manos, así como el alma; y si un hombre hace algún trabajillo en horas extraordinarias, es decir, si construye un horno para su mujer a fin de que no se vea obligada a ir a la tahona, o se dedica a cultivar el jardín y hace crecer dos patatas en vez de una, realiza un bien mayor y está tan cerca de Dios como si anduviese corriendo detrás de un predicador y se dedicase a rezar y a gemir.

—¡Bien dicho, Adam! —exclamó Sandy Jim, que había interrumpido el movimiento de su cepillo para tomar otras tablas mientras aquél hablaba—. Éste es el mejor sermón que he oído en mucho tiempo. Por eso mismo quiere mi mujer que le construya un horno.

—Hay mucha razón en lo que has dicho, Adam —observó Seth con grave acento—. Pero no me negarás que, gracias a haber escuchado a los predicadores, quienes les han convencido de su culpabilidad, muchos perezosos se han transformado en hombres activos. Con gran frecuencia el predicador vacía la taberna; y si un hombre adquiere un poco de religión, no por eso trabajará peor.

—Aunque a veces se olvide de los paneles de las puertas. ¿No es verdad, Seth? —preguntó Wiry Ben.

—Bueno, Ben, ya tienes contra mí un motivo de burla que te durará toda la vida. Aunque en eso la religión no tuvo ninguna culpa. Se debió a que Seth Bede es un individuo muy distraído y, por desgracia, la religión no lo ha curado todavía.

—No me hagas caso, Seth —dijo Wiry Ben—. Eres un buen muchacho, tanto si te olvidas de los paneles como si no; además, no te molestan las bromas, como a otras personas que yo conozco y que se creen demasiado listas.

—Mira, Seth —observó Adam haciendo caso omiso de aquel sarcasmo dirigido a él—. No debes guardarme rencor, pues con nada de lo que he dicho pretendía censurarte. Cada uno tiene su modo especial de considerar las cosas.

—Sí, ya sé que no te dirigías a mí, Adam —replicó Seth—. Eso me consta. Haces como tu perro Gyp. Algunas veces me ladra, pero inmediatamente me lame la mano.

Todos los obreros trabajaron en silencio durante algunos minutos hasta que el reloj de la iglesia empezó a dar las seis. Antes de que se hubiese apagado la vibración de la primera campanada, Sandy Jim dejó el cepillo y tomó su chaqueta. Wiry Ben, que en aquel momento estaba dando vueltas a un tornillo, dejó la operación a medio concluir y arrojó al capazo de las herramientas el destornillador con que trabajaba; Mum Taft, que, haciendo honor a su nombre[1], había guardado silencio durante toda la conversación anterior, dejó caer el martillo en el momento en que se disponía a levantarlo; y también Seth enderezó la espalda y llevó la mano hacia su gorro de papel. Tan sólo Adam continuó con su trabajo como si no hubiese ocurrido nada; pero al observar que todos cesaban en la tarea levantó los ojos y, con la mayor indignación, dijo:

—Me resulta muy desagradable ver que los hombres abandonan de este modo sus herramientas en cuanto el reloj empieza a dar la hora, como si no hallasen ningún placer en su trabajo y temiesen dar un golpe de más.

Seth se quedó algo avergonzado y prosiguió con mayor lentitud sus preparativos de marcha; pero Mum Taft interrumpió su silencio y dijo:

—Mira, Adam. Hablas como un joven. Cuando tengas cuarenta y seis años como yo, en vez de veintiséis, no tendrás tantas ganas de trabajar porque sí.

—¡Tonterías! —replicó Adam todavía irritado—. ¿Qué tiene que ver la edad con todo eso? Creo que todavía no eres incapaz de trabajar. Me fastidia ver que los brazos de un hombre se quedan colgando, igual que si acabara de recibir un balazo, antes de que dé la hora en el reloj, como si nunca hubiese experimentado la menor satisfacción en su tarea. Hasta la misma muela continúa girando unos momentos después de dejarla.

—Cálmate, Adam —exclamó Wiry Ben—, y deja tranquilos a los compañeros. Hace un momento criticabas a los predicadores, y la verdad es que te gusta mucho predicar. Es posible que prefieras el trabajo al juego, pero a mí me sucede lo contrario. Es una compensación, y de este modo te dejo más trabajo para ti.

Con estas frases finales, que consideró muy eficaces, Wiry Ben tomó el cesto y abandonó el taller, seguido rápidamente por Mum Taft y Sandy Jim. Seth se entretuvo un poco, mirando a Adam muy apurado como si esperase que le dijera algo.

—¿Irás a casa antes de asistir al sermón? —preguntó Adam levantando los ojos.

—No. Ya tengo el sombrero y mis cosas en casa de Will Maskery. No iré a casa hasta las diez, porque acompañaré hasta la suya a Dinah Morris, si ella quiere. Como ya sabes, ninguno de los Poyser la acompaña.

—Entonces diré a nuestra madre que no te espere —contestó Adam.

—Y tú, ¿no irás esta noche a casa de Poyser? —preguntó Seth con alguna timidez cuando se disponía a abandonar el taller.

—No. Yo iré a la escuela.

Hasta aquel momento Gyp había permanecido en su cómodo lecho, pero ahora que los otros obreros se marchaban, levantó la cabeza para observar a Adam. En cuanto éste se metió el nivel en el bolsillo y empezó a quitarse el delantal, Gyp avanzó y se quedó mirando pacientemente el rostro de su amo. De haber tenido rabo, Gyp lo habría meneado, pero como carecía de tal medio de exteriorizar sus emociones, se veía, como otros dignos personajes, obligado a parecer más flemático de lo que le hiciera la naturaleza.

—¿Qué? ¿Estás ya dispuesto a tomar el cesto, Gyp? —preguntó Adam con la misma voz afable con que hablaba a Seth.

Gyp saltó y emitió un corto ladrido, como para decir: «Desde luego». El pobrecillo no tenía muchos medios de expresión.

El cesto servía para transportar la comida de Adam y de Seth en los días laborables, y ningún concurrente a una procesión podría haber demostrado menos atención a sus conocidos que Gyp cuando llevaba el cesto y trotaba detrás de su amo.

Al salir del taller, Adam cerró la puerta, quitó la llave y fue a dejarla en una casita que había en el lado

opuesto del patio. Era una vivienda baja, con tejado de bálago gris y paredes ocres, cuya visión resultaba agradable y suave a la luz de la tarde. Las ventanas con vidrios emplomados estaban brillantes y sin manchas, y la losa que había ante el umbral estaba tan limpia y blanca como un canto redondo de la playa al retirarse la marea. Sobre esta losa se hallaba una mujer limpia y anciana que llevaba una bata de listas oscuras, un pañuelo rojo y un gorro de hilo; en aquel momento hablaba a unas gallinas de plumaje moteado que, sin duda, se habían acercado a ella con la ilusoria esperanza de que les diese unas patatas frías o un poco de cebada. La vista de la anciana no parecía ser demasiado buena, porque no conoció a Adam hasta que éste le dijo:

—Aquí está la llave, Dolly. ¿Querrá hacerme el favor de guardarla en su casa?

—¡Ya lo creo! ¿No quieres entrar, Adam? Está la señorita Mary y maese Burge volverá pronto. Estoy segura de que les gustaría mucho cenar contigo.

—No puedo, Dolly. Muchas gracias. Me voy a casa. Buenas tardes.

Adam emprendió el camino a largos pasos y seguido de cerca por Gyp; salió del patio del taller y tomó la carretera en la dirección que le alejaba del pueblo y le llevaba al valle. Al llegar a la parte inferior de la pendiente, un jinete de cierta edad, que llevaba la maleta sujeta en la parte posterior de la silla, detuvo el caballo después de pasar Adam por su lado y se volvió para contemplar otra vez al fornido obrero, que aún conservaba el gorro de papel en la cabeza y vestía calzones de cuero y medias de lana de color oscuro.

Adam, sin sospechar la admiración que había despertado, continuó andando a campo traviesa y entonó el canto que durante todo el día había ocupado su mente:

Haz que tus palabras sean sinceras
y tu conciencia clara como el mediodía;
porque Dios, que lo ve todo, vigila
tus secretos pensamientos, tus obras y tus costumbres.

II

El sermón

Hacia las seis y cuarto se observó una excitación extraordinaria en el pueblo de Hayslope, y a todo lo largo de su pequeña calle, desde el Donnithorne Arms hasta la puerta del cementerio, se hacía evidente que los habitantes habían salido de sus casas por alguna razón más importante que el placer de gozar del sol de la tarde. El Donnithorne Arms se hallaba a la entrada del pueblo, y la era y los pajares inmediatos a la posada indicaban que ésta poseía algunas tierras, lo cual daba al viajero la promesa de obtener una buena comida para él y un buen pienso para el caballo, quizás para consolarle de la ignorancia en que le dejaba el letrero, descolorido y despintado por las inclemencias del tiempo, con el escudo de armas de la antigua familia de los Donnithorne. El señor Casson, dueño de la posada, se asomó un rato a la puerta; con las manos en los bolsillos, apoyándose alternativamente en los talones y en la punta de los pies, contemplaba un campo sin cercar con un arce en el centro a cuyo alrededor se iban reuniendo algunos hombres y mujeres de expresión grave a quienes antes había visto pasar.

La persona del señor Casson no pertenecía, de ningún modo, al tipo de las que pueden dejarse pasar sin descripción. Vista de frente, parecía estar compuesta principalmente por dos esferas, relacionadas entre sí como lo están la tierra y la luna: la esfera inferior vendría a tener unas trece veces el volumen de la superior que, naturalmente, ocupaba el lugar de satélite y era tributaria de la otra. Pero aquí terminaba el parecido, porque la cabeza del señor Casson no era un satélite de aspecto melancólico, ni tampoco un «globo lleno de manchas», según Milton llamó irreverentemente a la luna; por el contrario, ninguna cabeza y rostro podrían haber tenido un aspecto más resplandeciente y saludable, y en cuanto a su expresión, en gran parte confinada a un par de mejillas redondas y rojizas, al leve nudo y a las interrupciones que formaban la nariz y los ojos, de los que apenas valdría la pena hablar, era alegre y satisfecha y estaba templada tan sólo por el sentimiento de dignidad personal que usualmente se exteriorizaba en su actitud y en su porte. Este sentido de la dignidad no podía considerarse excesivo en un hombre que fue mayordomo de «la familia» por espacio de quince años, y que, en su situación actual y distinguida, estaba, necesariamente, en frecuente contacto con sus inferiores. Y el modo de reconciliar su dignidad con la satisfacción de su curiosidad, dirigiéndose hacia el parque, era, precisamente, el problema que el señor Casson resolvía en su mente desde cinco minutos antes; pero cuando lo hubo resuelto en parte, sacó las manos de los bolsillos y las metió en las sisas del chaleco, inclinó la cabeza a un lado y adoptó una actitud de desdeñosa indiferencia por cuanto pudiese observar. En aquel momento sus ideas fueron distraídas por la aproximación del jinete a quien últimamente vimos detenerse para contemplar a nuestro amigo Adam, y que a la sazón se encaminaba directamente hacia la puerta de el Donnithorne Arms.

—Quítale la brida y dale de beber, palafrenero —dijo el viajero a un muchacho que llevaba una blusa de obrero y que salió al patio al oír el ruido de los cascos del caballo.

—¿Qué ocurre en este bonito pueblo, hostelero? —continuó, echando pie a tierra—. Parece que reina cierta agitación…

—Una metodista va a predicar, señor. Es una joven que va a predicar en el parque —contestó el señor Casson con voz trémula y jadeante, de acento algo afectado—. ¿Quiere entrar, señor, y tomar algo?

—No. Debo continuar hacia Drosseter. Sólo quería dar de beber a mi caballo. ¿Y qué dice vuestro párroco de que una joven se disponga a predicar casi en sus mismas barbas?

—El párroco Irwine, señor, no vive aquí, sino en Broxton, más allá de esa colina. La casa parroquial del pueblo se halla en muy mal estado y no podría ofrecer una vivienda apropiada para un caballero. Él viene

aquí a predicar todos los domingos por la tarde y siempre deja el caballo en la posada. Monta una jaca gris, a la que tiene en gran aprecio. Desde mucho antes de que yo fuese el dueño de el Donnithorne Arms, tiene la costumbre de dejar aquí su montura. Yo no soy del país, según podrá apreciar por mi modo de hablar, señor. En esta tierra hablan de un modo muy raro y a los caballeros les resulta difícil comprenderles. Yo me eduqué entre caballeros, señor, y desde mi infancia adquirí la costumbre de hablar como ellos. Aquí, en cambio, se habla un dialecto muy difícil de comprender. Y muchas veces le oí decir al caballero Donnithorne que lo que hablan aquí es eso: un dialecto.

—Sí, lo sé muy bien —contestó sonriendo el desconocido—. Pero en esta región agrícola no debéis de tener muchos metodistas. Y la verdad es que me habría parecido en extremo difícil encontrar a uno de ellos por estos lugares. Aquí todo el mundo es agricultor, ¿verdad? Los metodistas suelen hacer pocos prosélitos entre los labradores.

—Hay bastantes obreros aquí, señor. Por ejemplo, el maestro Burge, que posee una carpintería y se dedica a reparaciones y construcciones. Tampoco están lejos unas canteras de piedra; de manera que hay muchos empleados en la región. Los metodistas abundan en Treddleston, o sea, la ciudad que hay a cinco kilómetros de distancia. Es posible que hayáis pasado por ella, señor. Ahora quizás tenemos ya una veintena de estos metodistas en el parque procedentes de allá. Y nuestra gente va ahora a oírles, aunque en Hayslope sólo tenemos dos metodistas: Will Maskery, el carretero, y Seth Bede, joven carpintero.

—De modo que la predicadora procede de Treddleston, ¿no es así?

—No, señor. Viene de Stonshire, a unos cincuenta kilómetros de aquí. Ha venido a hacer una visita a maese Poyser, en Hall Farm, esa granja que ve entre esos pajares y grandes nogales a la izquierda, señor. Esa joven es sobrina de la esposa de Poyser, quien está un poco disgustado de que la muchacha haga esas tonterías. Sin embargo, he oído decir que nada es capaz de contener a los metodistas cuando se han metido una idea en la cabeza. Muchos de ellos empiezan a dar señales de locura religiosa. A pesar de ello, esa muchacha parece muy apacible, según me han dado a entender, porque yo no la he visto todavía.

—Me gustaría mucho esperar para tener ocasión de verla, pero debo continuar mi viaje. Ya me he alejado de mi camino más de veinte minutos para contemplar el valle. Creo que pertenece al caballero Donnithorne, ¿no es cierto?

—Sí, señor. Es Donnithorne Chase. Tiene unos robles magníficos, ¿no es verdad? Yo conozco eso muy bien, porque he vivido allí durante quince años como mayordomo. El heredero actual es el capitán Donnithorne, nieto del caballero Donnithorne. Alcanzará la mayoría de edad en cuanto se recoja la cosecha del heno, y entonces creo que habrá una celebración. El caballero Donnithorne posee todas las tierras de los alrededores.

—Lo cierto es que el lugar es muy bonito, cualquiera que sea su dueño —replicó el viajero mientras montaba a caballo—. Y también por aquí se ven unos jóvenes magníficos. Hace cosa de media hora, antes de llegar a la cima de la colina, vi al mozo más fornido que he contemplado en la vida. Es un individuo de anchos hombros, de cabello y ojos negros, y que anda con paso militar. Nos convendrían muchos individuos como ése para dar un disgusto a los franceses.

—Ese, señor, es Adam Bede, estoy seguro. Hijo de Mathias Bede. Aquí lo conoce todo el mundo. Es un muchacho muy inteligente y que tiene una fuerza maravillosa. Así Dios os bendiga, caballero, y dispénseme si hablo de este modo, pero el caso es que es capaz de recorrer sesenta kilómetros por día y de levantar un peso de cien kilos. Los caballeros le quieren mucho; el capitán Donnithorne y el párroco Irwine le aprecian mucho, pero él es un poco altanero y orgulloso.

—Buenas tardes, hostelero. He de marcharme.

—Soy su servidor, señor. Buenas tardes.

El viajero obligó a su caballo a tomar un paso rápido para atravesar el pueblo, pero al llegar al parque, la belleza del paisaje que tenía a la derecha y el singular contraste que ofrecían los grupos de aldeanos con el otro más pequeño de los metodistas, que estaban al lado del arce, y quizás también la curiosidad de ver a la joven predicadora, le hicieron detenerse y olvidar el deseo de concluir su viaje.

El parque se hallaba en el extremo del pueblo, y allí se bifurcaba el camino; de una parte ascendía zigzagueando por la colina y pasaba por el lado de la iglesia, y de otra, serpenteando suavemente, descendía hasta el valle. Por el lado del parque que conducía hasta la iglesia, la línea interrumpida de cabañas continuaba casi hasta llegar a la puerta del cementerio; pero por el lado opuesto, es decir, hacia el noroeste, nada ocultaba la vista de los suaves prados y del valle cubierto de bosque, así como de las oscuras masas de las enormes montañas distantes. Aquel rico distrito de tierra ondulada del Loamshire a que pertenecía Hayslope se hallaba junto a uno de los feos límites de Stonyshire y dominado por sus peladas montañas, del mismo modo como una hermosa y lozana muchacha puede verse a veces cogida del brazo de

su hermano, moreno y de rostro arrugado; y en dos o tres horas más de viaje, el jinete abandonaría una región pelada y desprovista de árboles, cruzada por grandes fajas de piedra fría y gris, para hallarse en el camino que corría al abrigo de los bosques o trasponía las suaves montañas cubiertas de matas y de hierba, así como de algunos trigales, donde a cada recodo del camino podría ver un precioso pueblo acurrucado en el valle o en lo alto de una pendiente, una casa solariega con su era y el montón de gavillas doradas o algún campanario gris surgiendo de la confusión de las copas de los árboles, de los tejados de bálago y de tejas de color rojo oscuro. Este fue el espectáculo que le ofreció la iglesia de Hayslope cuando el viajero empezó a subir por la suave pendiente que conducía a sus agradables tierras altas, y ahora, al hallarse cerca del parque, tenía ante sí, y en un solo panorama, casi todos los rasgos típicos de aquella agradable comarca. A gran altura y hacia el horizonte, se veían las masas enormes y cónicas de las montañas, semejantes a murallas gigantescas que fortificaban aquella región de trigo y hierba contra los fuertes e implacables vientos del norte; no estaban lo bastante lejanas para quedar envueltas en un purpúreo misterio, sino que sus laderas tenían un color verdoso, claramente tachonado por las ovejas, cuyo movimiento podía observarse haciendo uso de la memoria y no de la vista; el transcurrir de las horas parecía cortejar a las montañas día tras día, pero ellas no respondían con ningún cambio en sí mismas y permanecían tristes y silenciosas, después de ruborizarse por la mañana, de resplandecer al mediodía en el mes de abril y de verse envueltas por la rojiza gloria del sol del verano, que parecía haber alcanzado toda su madurez. E indirectamente, debajo de ellas, la vista se fijaba en una línea más avanzada de bosques colgantes, divididos por brillantes fajas de pastos o de campos de labor, y, sin embargo, no confundidos en la frondosa y uniforme cortina del verano, sino que aún mostraban las cálidas tintas de los robles jóvenes y el tierno verde de los fresnos y de los tilos. Luego se extendía el valle, donde los bosques eran más espesos, como si hubiesen rodado montaña abajo para ocupar las fajas de tierra de la pendiente a fin de cuidar mejor de la alta mansión, que levantaba sus parapetos y, entre ellos, enviaba al cielo el humo azul del verano. Sin duda en la parte delantera de tal vivienda debía de haber una gran extensión de césped y un dilatado y brillante espejo formado por las aguas del estanque; pero la suave pendiente de los prados no permitía a nuestro viajero verlo desde el prado del pueblo. En vez de eso, vio una faja de tierra, también muy bella, en la que el sol brillaba como oro transparente entre los tallos ligeramente encorvados de la hierba suave y los de color rojo de las acederas y las blancas umbelas de las píceas que rodeaban los espesos setos. Era aquel momento del verano en que el ligero ruido de la guadaña, cuando la afilan, nos obliga a dirigir con mayor intensidad la mirada sobre las flores que salpican el tono verdoso de los prados.

De haberse vuelto un poco sobre la silla para mirar hacia el este, más allá de los pastos y del depósito de madera de Jonathan Burge, hacia los verdes campos de trigo y los nogales de Hall Farm, habría podido observar otras bellezas del paisaje; mas, al parecer, le interesaban principalmente los grupos de personas que tenía cerca. Allí estaban representadas todas las generaciones del pueblo, desde el viejo tío Taft, que se cubría la cabeza con un gorro de noche de estambre, y que, con el cuerpo encorvado, aunque bastante sólido para sostenerse en pie, se apoyaba en su corto bastón, hasta los niños de redondas cabecitas que avanzaban llevando sus gorros acolchados. De vez en cuando llegaba alguno más, quizás un labrador que andaba inclinado y que después de cenar iba a presenciar la extraordinaria escena con mirada lenta y bovina, dispuesto a oír cualquier explicación que le diesen de la escena, pero no lo bastante excitado para hacer pregunta alguna. Sin embargo, todos tenían mucho cuidado de no unirse a los metodistas que había en el parque, y se reunían con el expectante público, pues si se les hubiese preguntado ninguno habría admitido que acudía allí para oír a la «predicadora», sino sólo para ver lo que ocurría. Los hombres se agrupaban principalmente cerca de la herrería. Pero no se imagine el lector que formaban un grupo. Los aldeanos nunca se congregan así. El conversar en voz baja es cosa desconocida entre ellos y parecen ser tan incapaces de hablar en un tono apagado como las vacas o los ciervos. El verdadero rústico vuelve la espalda a su interlocutor y le dirige una pregunta por encima del hombro, cual si se dispusiera a huir de la respuesta, y aun le precede uno o dos pasos al llegar al punto más interesante del diálogo. Así, el grupo que había en la vecindad de la herrería no era muy compacto y no ocultaba la fachada de Chad Cranage; el herrero, que estaba de pie con sus bronceados brazos cruzados, apoyado en la jamba de la puerta, riéndose de vez en cuando con fuertes carcajadas de sus propias bromas, que prefería a los sarcasmos de Wiry Ben, quien había renunciado a los placeres del Holly Bush por el gusto de ver la vida bajo una nueva forma. Pero el señor Joshua Rann trataba con igual desprecio aquellas dos muestras de ingenio. El delantal de cuero del señor Rann y su relativa suciedad no podía ofrecer ninguna duda respecto a su condición de zapatero del pueblo; además, su estómago y su barbilla salientes, y sus pulgares, que giraban uno en torno al otro, eran otras tantas indicaciones sutiles encaminadas a advertir a los forasteros imprudentes que se hallaban en presencia del sacristán de la parroquia. El viejo Joshua, según le llamaban sus vecinos con la mayor

irreverencia, se hallaba en un estado de contenida indignación; pero aún no había abierto los labios, excepto para decir, con sonora voz de bajo, afinando como un violoncelo, «Sehón, rey de los amontas, porque para siempre es su misericordia, y Oh, rey de Bashan, porque para siempre es su misericordia», cita que aparentemente no era aplicable a aquella ocasión, pero, como ocurre con otras rarezas, un conocimiento adecuado demostrará que era una consecuencia natural. El señor Rann sostenía en su interior la dignidad de la Iglesia ante aquella irrupción escandalosa del metodismo, y como tal indignación era expresada con sus citas sonoras de los responsos, su alegato evocaba, naturalmente, el salmo que había leído el domingo anterior por la tarde.

La curiosidad más viva de las mujeres las llevó al borde del parque, donde podrían examinar de cerca el traje, semejante al de los cuáqueros, y el porte extraño de los metodistas del género femenino. Debajo del arce se veía un cochecito traído desde el taller del carretero para que sirviese de púlpito, y en torno a él había un par de bancos y algunas sillas. En ellas se sentaban algunos metodistas con los ojos cerrados, como si se hubiesen entregado al rezo o a la meditación; otros prefirieron continuar de pie y dirigieron sus rostros hacia los aldeanos, con expresión compasiva y melancólica, que resultaba muy cómica para Bessy Cranage, la regordeta hija del herrero, conocida por sus vecinos como Bess Chad, que se extrañaba de la curiosidad de la gente. Bess Chad era objeto de especial compasión porque llevaba el cabello peinado hacia atrás, bajo un gorro encajado en la parte alta de la cabeza, dejando al descubierto un adorno del que se enorgullecía más que de sus rojas mejillas y que consistía en un par de grandes y redondos pendientes con granates falsos, adorno condenado no sólo por los metodistas, sino también por su prima y tocaya Bess Timothy, quien, haciendo gala de la envidia propia entre las primas, deseaba a menudo poseer otros pendientes semejantes.

Bess Timothy, aunque entre sus parientes conservaba su nombre de soltera, hacía muchos años que se había casado con Sandyjim y poseía una hermosa colección de joyas matronales, de las cuales basta mencionar la regordeta criatura que mecía en sus brazos y el vigoroso muchacho de cinco años, con pantalones hasta la rodilla y rojas piernas, que, a guisa de tambor, llevaba un oxidado pote de leche colgado del cuello, y a quien evitaba con el mayor cuidado el pequeño *terrier* de Chad. Este joven ramo de olivo, muy famoso y conocido por el nombre de Ben Timothy, era muy curioso, carecía de falsa modestia y avanzó, alejándose del grupo de mujeres y de niños, hasta hallarse junto a los metodistas; les miraba con gran curiosidad y con la boca abierta, y, al mismo tiempo, golpeaba con su palito el pote de hojalata, a guisa de acompañamiento musical. Pero en cuanto una de las mujeres de edad se inclinó hacia él para cogerlo por el hombro, con expresión enfadada, Ben Timothy le propinó una vigorosa patada y luego echó a correr para buscar refugio detrás de las piernas de su padre.

—Mira, travieso —dijo Sandyjim con cierto orgullo paternal—, si no te estás quieto con ese palo, te lo voy a quitar. ¿Quién te ha enseñado a dar puntapiés?

—Mándamelo aquí, Jim —dijo Chad Cranage—. Lo ataré y le pondré herraduras, como hago con los caballos. ¡Hola, maese Casson! —continuó diciendo al ver que este personaje se acercaba al grupo de los hombres—. ¿Cómo está? ¿Ha venido a sumarse a la protesta? Dicen que la gente siempre lo hace cuando predican los metodistas.

—Mejor será que no diga tonterías, Chad —replicó el señor Casson con cierta dignidad—. A Poyser no le gustaría oír que se trata con poco respeto a la sobrina de su mujer, a pesar de que le disguste su afición a predicar.

—Es una muchacha muy agradable —dijo Wiry Ben—. A mí me gusta más que prediquen las mujeres bonitas, y estoy seguro de que me convencerán antes que los hombres feos. No estoy seguro de que no acabe convirtiéndome al metodismo y cortejando a la predicadora, como Seth Bede.

—Yo creo que Seth apunta demasiado alto —observó el señor Casson—. Los parientes de esa joven no consentirían que se casara con un vulgar carpintero.

—¿Y qué tienen que ver en eso los parientes? —dijo Ben con voz trémula—. Nada. Lo mejor que puede hacer la esposa de Poyser es no meterse en eso. Además, esta Dinah Morris, según me dicen, es tan pobre como lo fue su tía; trabaja en una fábrica de hilados, y bastante le cuesta ganarse la vida. Por eso, un joven carpintero convertido al metodismo, como Seth, no sería un mal partido para ella. Además, los Poyser quieren a Adam Bede como si fuese su propio sobrino.

—Esto no tiene nada que ver —observó el señor Joshua Rann. Adam y Seth son muy distintos, y no hay que confundir uno con otro.

—Es posible —contestó Wiry Ben con desdeñoso acento—. Pero yo prefiero a Seth, aunque fuera dos veces metodista. Es un muchacho que me gusta y, a pesar de que siempre le estoy haciendo bromas en el trabajo, no me guarda el más mínimo rencor. Además, es un joven de gran corazón, como lo demuestra el

hecho de que una noche, al cruzar los campos, vimos incendiado un árbol viejo y, aunque nos figuramos que era cosa del otro mundo, Seth no se asustó y acudió a apagar el incendio con gran valor. Pero ahora sale de casa de Will Maskery; le acompaña este último y se muestra tan humilde como si no fuese capaz de dar un martillazo en la cabeza de un clavo por no hacerle daño. Aquí está también la hermosa predicadora. ¡Caramba! Se ha quitado el gorro. Voy a acercarme un poco más.

Varios hombres siguieron a Ben, y el viajero condujo su caballo al parque, mientras Dinah andaba, algo presurosa, precediendo a sus compañeros y en dirección al coche que había bajo el arce. Al lado de Seth, que era de alta estatura, parecía bajita, pero en cuanto subió al coche y se halló lejos de toda comparación posible, se vio que tenía la estatura corriente de las mujeres aunque, en realidad, no la aventajaba, o al menos así lo parecía por el aspecto que daban a su figura las líneas sencillas de su traje negro. El forastero se quedó sorprendido al verla mientras se acercaba y cuando hubo subido al coche; su sorpresa era hija no tanto de la femenina delicadeza del aspecto de la joven, como de la indiferencia con respecto a sí misma que sus movimientos parecían indicar. Se había imaginado que avanzaría con paso mesurado, grave, con solemnidad; estaba seguro de que su rostro tendría la sonrisa de la santidad consciente, o que, por el contrario, estaría cargado de amargura y de severidad. Sólo conocía dos tipos de metodistas: los que parecían estar en éxtasis constante y los biliosos. Pero Dinah andaba con la misma sencillez que si se dirigiera al mercado y parecía tan poco preocupada de su aspecto exterior como pudiera estarlo un muchacho. No había en ella rubor ni temblor que dijeran: «Sé que todos vosotros opináis que soy una mujer hermosa y demasiado joven para predicar». Y tampoco se advertía un acentuado movimiento de los párpados, ninguna compresión de los labios, ni una actitud de los brazos que dijese: «Pero también debéis creerme una santa». No sostenía libro alguno en sus manos sin guantes, sino que las llevaba caídas y ligeramente cruzadas ante ella, y así subió al coche y volvió sus ojos grises hacía el auditorio. En sus ojos no se advertía ninguna mirada intensa y aguda. Más parecían derramar amor que observar. Tenían aquella mirada líquida que indica que la mente está llena de lo que se va a exteriorizar, en vez de dejarse impresionar por los objetos externos. Permanecía de pie y con la mano izquierda tendida al sol poniente; unas ramas frondosas la protegían de sus rayos, pero a aquella luz tenue el delicado color de su rostro parecía cobrar una apacible vivacidad, como se advierte en las flores al avanzar la tarde. Tenía un rostro pequeño, de blancura uniforme y transparente, y sus mejillas y barbilla dibujaban un óvalo perfecto; la boca era firme y graciosa; la nariz, fina y suave, y la frente, no muy alta, era recta y estaba coronada por un arco de suaves rizos de color pálido rojizo. Llevaba el cabello peinado hacia atrás y recogido mas allá de las orejas; estaba cubierto, a excepción de unos milímetros por encima del rostro, por un gorro cuáquero en forma de red. Las cejas, que eran del mismo color del cabello, describían una línea casi horizontal y muy fina. Las pestañas, aunque no parecían más oscuras, eran largas y abundantes, y, en una palabra, en todo su aspecto nada se advertía desordenado o sin terminar. Era uno de aquellos rostros que hacen recordar las flores blancas con ligeros toques de color en sus puros pétalos. Los ojos no tenían ninguna belleza peculiar, aparte de su expresión. Parecían sencillos, cándidos, serios y amorosos, y ningún rostro acusador o burlón era capaz de resistir su mirada. Joshua Rann tosió largamente, como si quisiera limpiarse la garganta a fin de llegar a un nuevo entendimiento consigo mismo. Chad Cranage se quitó el gorro de piel y se rascó la cabeza, mientras Wiry Ben se preguntaba cómo podía Seth tener el valor de cortejarla.

«Es una mujercita dulce —se dijo el viajero—. Pero estoy seguro de que no la hizo predicadora la naturaleza».

Tal vez él era uno de aquellos que creen que la naturaleza tiene ciertas dotes teatrales y que, a fin de facilitar el arte y la psicología, caracteriza a sus personajes con objeto de que no pueda existir duda alguna acerca de ellos.

En aquel momento Dinah empezó a hablar.

—Queridos amigos —dijo con voz clara, aunque no muy alta—. Oremos solicitando una bendición. —Cerró los ojos e, inclinando un poco la cabeza, continuó en el mismo tono suave, como si hablase a alguien que estuviese muy cerca de ella—. ¡Salvador de los pecadores! Cuando una pobre mujer, cargada de pecados, salió en dirección al pozo con objeto de sacar agua, te encontró a Ti, sentado al pie del pozo. Ella no te conocía y tampoco te había buscado. Su mente se hallaba sumida en la sombra y su vida no era santa. Mas Tú le hablaste, Tú le enseñaste, Tú le demostraste que su vida no podía estar oculta a tus ojos y que, sin embargo, estabas dispuesto a darle la bendición que ella nunca buscó. ¡Jesús! Estás entre nosotros y conoces a todos los hombres. Si hay aquí algunos semejantes a aquella pobre mujer, si sus mentes están sumidas en las tinieblas y sus vidas no son santas, si han venido, no a buscarte, y tampoco deseosos de ser enseñados, trátales de acuerdo con la misericordia que demostraste con ella. Háblales, Señor, abre sus oídos a mis palabras, haz que recuerden sus pecados y obra de modo que sientan el deseo de la salvación que estás

dispuesto a ofrecerles.

»Señor, estás aún en tu pueblo, te ven en las horas de vigilia de la noche y sus corazones arden dentro de sí mismos cuando Tú hablas. Y Tú estás cerca de aquellos que no te han conocido; abre sus ojos para que puedan verte, para que puedan contemplarte mientras lloras por ellos y dices: "¿No queréis venir a Mí para alcanzar la vida?". Para que te vean colgado de la cruz y diciendo: "Perdónalos, Padre, porque no saben lo que hacen". Y para que te vean cuando estés dispuesto a volver rodeado de gloria para juzgarlos definitivamente. Amén.

Dinah abrió de nuevo los ojos e hizo una pausa, mirando al grupo de aldeanos que se había reunido a menor distancia y a su derecha.

—Queridos amigos —empezó diciendo con una voz un poco más alta—. Todos vosotros habéis estado en la iglesia y espero que habréis oído cómo el sacerdote lee estas palabras: «El espíritu del Señor está sobre mí, porque me ha ungido para predicar el Evangelio a los pobres». Jesucristo pronunció estas palabras y dijo que había venido a predicar el Evangelio a los pobres; ignoro si habéis reflexionado alguna vez acerca de estas palabras, pero os diré cuándo recuerdo haberlas oído por primera vez. Era en una tarde muy parecida a ésta, yo era pequeña y mi tía, que me crió, me llevó a oír a un hombre que predicaba al aire libre, precisamente como estamos ahora. Recuerdo bien su rostro: era muy viejo y tenía el cabello largo y blanco; su voz era suave y hermosa, muy distinta de cuantas había oído hasta entonces. Yo era muy pequeña y apenas sabía nada; sin embargo, aquel anciano me pareció tan diferente de todas las personas que había visto hasta entonces, que incluso llegué a creer en la posibilidad de que hubiese bajado del cielo para predicar entre nosotros. Y dije: «Oye tía, ¿volverá esta noche al cielo, como se ve en aquel dibujo de la Biblia?».

»Aquel hombre de Dios era el señor Wesley, que pasó la vida haciendo lo mismo que Nuestro Señor; es decir, predicando el Evangelio a los pobres, y hace ocho años alcanzó el descanso eterno. Años después pude saber algo más acerca de él, pero aún entonces yo era una niña irreflexiva y sólo recuerdo una cosa de las que nos dijo en su sermón. Dijo que Evangelio significa "buenas noticias". El Evangelio, según ya sabéis, es lo que la Biblia nos cuenta acerca de Dios.

»Ahora reflexionad sobre esto. Jesucristo descendió del cielo del mismo modo como yo, tonta criatura, creí que había bajado el señor Wesley, y precisamente nuestro Señor descendió con objeto de comunicar a los pobres las buenas noticias acerca de Dios. Porque, en realidad, vosotros y yo, queridos amigos, somos pobres. Nos hemos criado en casitas pobres; nuestra comida ha consistido muchas veces en tortas de avena, y, en general, nuestra existencia ha sido algo ruda; hemos ido poco a la escuela, no hemos leído libros y lo ignoramos casi todo, a excepción de lo que ocurre a nuestro alrededor. Somos, pues, precisamente la clase de gente que necesita oír buenas noticias. Porque cuando alguien se halla en una situación agradable, no le importa conocer nuevas de los países distantes; pero si un hombre o una mujer pobres se hallan en una dificultad y tienen que ejecutar un trabajo pesado para vivir, gustan de recibir una carta que les comunique la existencia de un amigo que está dispuesto a ayudarles. Indudablemente algunas veces sabemos algo de Dios, aunque nunca hayamos oído el Evangelio, las buenas noticias que nuestro Salvador quiso traernos. Sabemos que todo procede de Dios. ¿No decimos, por ejemplo, todos los días, "Ocurrirá esto o lo otro, si Dios quiere", o también: "Pronto empezaremos a segar la hierba, quiera Dios mandarnos unos días buenos"? Sabemos muy bien que estamos por completo en manos de Dios; nosotros no hemos venido al mundo por nuestra voluntad, y somos incapaces de conservarnos vivos mientras dormimos; la luz del día, el viento, el trigo y las vacas que nos dan leche…, todo cuanto tenemos procede de Dios. Y Él nos dio nuestras almas, puso el amor entre padres e hijos y entre marido y mujer. Pero ¿es eso todo cuanto deseamos saber acerca de Dios? Vemos que es grande y poderoso y que puede hacer cuanto quiere; y nos vemos perdidos, como si luchásemos con las aguas en alta mar, al tratar de pensar en Él.

»Mas quizás nacen en vuestras mentes algunas dudas como ésta: ¿Puede Dios fijarse mucho en la pobre gente como nosotros? Tal vez hizo el mundo para los grandes, los sabios y los ricos. Probablemente no le cuesta mucho darnos nuestro puñado de comida y algún vestido; pero ¿cómo sabemos que cuida de nosotros más de lo que nosotros mismos cuidamos de los gusanos y de las alimañas del jardín al sembrar nuestras zanahorias y nuestras cebollas? ¿Cuidará Dios de nosotros en cuanto muramos? ¿Nos reserva algún consuelo cuando estamos heridos, enfermos o inválidos? Tal vez también está irritado contra nosotros, pues, de no ser así, ¿para qué haría aparecer el pulgón, o por qué razón habría malas cosechas, liebres o enfermedades y mil formas de dolor y de inquietud? Porque nuestra vida está llena de inquietud, y si, al parecer, Dios nos manda el bien, del mismo modo nos envía el mal. ¿Cómo es posible? ¿Cómo es eso?

»¡Ah, queridos amigos! Tenemos grandísima necesidad de recibir buenas nuevas acerca de Dios. Mas ¿qué significarán otras buenas nuevas, si no hemos recibido éstas? Porque, al final, todo acaba, y cuando

morimos, mal de nuestro grado, nos vemos obligados a abandonarlo todo. Pero cuando todo ha terminado ya, aún nos queda Dios. ¿Qué haremos, pues, si Él no es nuestro amigo?

Entonces Dinah les dijo cómo se habían recibido aquellas buenas nuevas y cómo los propósitos de Dios, con respecto a los pobres, se habían hecho manifiestos en la vida de Jesús, e hizo mención, particularmente, de su humildad y de sus actos de misericordia.

—Ya veis, pues, queridos amigos —continuó—, que Jesús pasó casi toda su vida haciendo bien a los pobres; predicaba para ellos al aire libre, buscaba la amistad de los pobres obreros y les enseñó y se ocupó de ellos. Y no por eso debe entenderse que abandonase a los ricos, porque amaba por igual a todos los hombres, si bien comprendió que los pobres necesitaban más su ayuda. Así, curó a los impedidos, a los enfermos y a los ciegos, y realizó milagros para alimentar a los hambrientos, porque, según dijo, le inspiraban compasión; y fue muy bondadoso con los niños, y consoló a quienes habían perdido a sus amigos, y hablaba con la mayor ternura a los pobres pecadores que se arrepentían de sus pecados.

»¡Ah! ¿No amaríais a un hombre como ése si le vierais aquí en este mismo pueblo? ¡Qué hermoso corazón debía de tener! ¡Qué amigo para los desgraciados! ¡Cuán agradable debía de ser recibir sus enseñanzas!

»Y ahora, queridos amigos, ¿quién era ese hombre? ¿Era tan sólo un hombre bueno, un hombre excelente, y nada más… como, por ejemplo, nuestro querido señor Wesley, que nos ha sido arrebatado? Nada de eso. Era, el Hijo de Dios. A imagen de su Padre, según dice la Biblia; eso significa que se parecía a Dios, que es el principio y el término de todas las cosas, es decir, del Dios a quien queremos conocer. Por consiguiente, todo el amor que Jesús demostraba a los pobres es el mismo amor que Dios tiene para nosotros. Podemos comprender los sentimientos de Jesús porque descendió a la tierra en un cuerpo semejante al nuestro y pronunciaba palabras semejantes a las que nosotros cruzamos entre nosotros. Antes los hombres temían pensar en Dios, en el Dios que hizo el mundo y el cielo, el trueno y los rayos. Nunca pudieron verlo y sólo les fue dable contemplar sus obras. Algunas de éstas eran terribles, y, por consiguiente, era natural que los hombres temblaran al pensar en Él. Pero nuestro bendito Salvador nos ha demostrado que Dios es, en cierto modo comprensible para la gente pobre e ignorante. Nos ha demostrado cómo es el corazón de Dios y cuáles son sus sentimientos por nosotros.

»Pero examinemos un poco más la razón de que Jesucristo viniese a la tierra. En una ocasión dijo: “Vine a buscar y a salvar lo que estaba perdido”. Y en otra ocasión dijo: “No he venido a llamar a los rectos de corazón, sino a infundir el arrepentimiento entre los pecadores”.

»¡Lo que se había perdido…! ¡Los pecadores…! ¡Ah, queridos amigos! ¿Seremos vosotros y yo?

Hasta entonces el viajero había permanecido clavado en su sitio contra su voluntad, sujeto por el encanto de la voz trémula y suave de Dinah, que tenía una gran variedad de modulaciones, como un fino instrumento tocado con la habilidad inconsciente del instinto musical. Las cosas sencillas que decía llegaban a parecer novedades, como una melodía nos proporciona una nueva sensación cuando la oímos entonada por la voz pura de un cantor juvenil; la apacible profundidad de la convicción con que hablaba parecía, por sí misma, un prueba de la verdad de sus afirmaciones. Observó que la joven se había apoderado por completo de sus oyentes. Los aldeanos estaban ya más cerca de ella y en todos los rostros no se advertía otra cosa sino grave atención. Ella hablaba con lentitud, aunque sin ninguna vacilación, deteniéndose tan sólo después de hacer una pregunta o antes de variar el curso de sus ideas. No había en ella ningún cambio de actitud o de gesto; el efecto de su oración lo produjeron enteramente las inflexiones de su voz, y cuando llegó a formular la pregunta «¿Cuidará Dios de nosotros cuando muramos?», lo hizo con tal tono de quejumbrosa súplica que se asomaron las lágrimas a los ojos de los oyentes más recalcitrantes. El viajero había cesado ya de dudar, como en un primer momento, si aquella muchacha sería o no capaz de conquistar la atención de sus rudos oyentes, pero aún se preguntaba si tendría la facultad de despertar sus emociones más violentas, lo que, sin duda, debía ser un sello, una condición necesaria en su vocación de predicadora metodista, hasta que, por fin, pronunció las palabras «¡Lo que se había perdido…! ¡Los pecadores…!», pues entonces hubo un cambio notable en su voz y en su actitud. Antes de esa exclamación había hecho una larga pausa, llena sin duda de pensamientos inquietos, a juzgar por la expresión concentrada de su pálido rostro, que palideció más aun; los círculos de sus ojos se acentuaron, como ocurre cuando asoman lágrimas que no llegan a caer; y los ojos, suaves y cariñosos, tomaron una expresión de súplica compasiva como si repentinamente hubiesen visto a un ángel destructor volando por encima de las cabezas de la gente. Su voz se tornó grave y velada, pero no hizo ningún gesto. Nadie estaba más lejos que Dinah del tipo corriente de orador. No predicaba como los demás, sino que exteriorizaba sus propias emociones dejándose llevar por la inspiración de su propia fe sencilla.

Pero en ese momento se había aventurado ya en una corriente de sentimiento distinta. Sus maneras eran

menos apacibles; su pronunciación, más rápida y agitada, mientras se esforzaba por mostrar a los oyentes su culpa, su voluntaria permanencia en las tinieblas y su desobediencia a Dios y hacía hincapié en el carácter odioso del pecado, en la santidad divina y en los sufrimientos del Salvador, gracias a los cuales se había abierto un nuevo camino para la salvación de la gente. Por fin pareció como si, impulsada por su ardiente deseo de salvar a las ovejas perdidas, ya no estuviese satisfecha al dirigirse a sus oyentes en conjunto, porque primero apeló a uno y luego a otro, suplicándoles, con lágrimas en los ojos, que se volviesen a Dios mientras aún estaban a tiempo; pintándoles la desolación de sus almas, hundidas en el pecado, que sólo hallaban su alimento en la basura de este mundo miserable, muy lejos de su Padre divino; y luego les hablaba del amor del Salvador, que esperaba y deseaba su vuelta al redil.

Entre sus compañeros metodistas hubo numerosos suspiros y gemidos, pero el alma colectiva de un pueblo no se inflamaba con tanta facilidad; de manera que una leve ansiedad, una diminuta chispa que podría morir fácilmente, fueron todo el efecto que, por un momento, causó en ellos la predicación de Dinah. Sin embargo, nadie se había retirado, a excepción de los niños y del viejo tío Taft, que, como era demasiado sordo y se le escapaban muchas palabras, hacía ya un buen rato que se había vuelto a su rincón junto a la chimenea. Wiry Ben sentía una gran inquietud y deseaba con toda su alma no haber ido a escuchar el sermón de Dinah; se dijo que las palabras que ella acababa de pronunciar le dejarían turbado por algún tiempo. A pesar de eso no apartaba los ojos de su rostro, ni dejaba de escuchar lo que decía, aunque temía el momento en que la joven fijara la mirada en él y se le dirigiese particularmente. Ya lo había hecho con Sandy Jim que, a la sazón, tenía en brazos al chiquillo para que su mujer descansara, y aquel hombre corpulento y de buen corazón se había limpiado algunas lágrimas con el puño, casi decidido a portarse mejor, a ir con menos frecuencia al Holly Bush, cerca de las canteras de piedra, y a lavarse con mayor regularidad los domingos.

Frente a Sandy Jim se hallaba Bess Chad, que demostró extraordinaria inmovilidad y fijeza de atención desde el momento en que Dinah empezó a hablar. No porque el asunto del sermón hubiese solicitado su interés, sino porque no acababa de comprender qué placer y satisfacción podía ofrecer la vida a una muchacha joven que llevase un gorro como el de Dinah. Por fin, desesperando de comprenderlo, empezó a fijarse en la nariz, en los ojos, en la boca y en el cabello de la predicadora, preguntándose si era preferible tener un rostro pálido como aquél o las rojas mejillas y los ojos negros y grandes como los suyos propios. Pero gradualmente se apoderó de ella la influencia de la gravedad general y acabó por atender a lo que decía Dinah. El tono cariñoso, la afable persuasión no le impresionaron en lo más mínimo, pero cuando la predicadora dirigió a sus oyentes algunos apostrofes severos, empezó a asustarse. La pobre Bess siempre fue considerada como algo díscola y traviesa; ella lo sabía, y puesto que era necesario ser muy buena, no hay duda de que seguía una mala conducta. En la iglesia no se hallaba a gusto, como, por ejemplo, Sally Rann, y, con mucha frecuencia, se había reído entre dientes del señor Irwine; tales deficiencias religiosas se veían acompañadas de una flojedad correspondiente en la moralidad, porque Bess pertenecía, sin duda alguna, a ese grupo de mujeres perezosas y sucias con quienes uno puede permitirse alguna libertad. Ella lo sabía y hasta entonces no se había avergonzado gran cosa. Sin embargo, ahora experimentaba la sensación de que se le había presentado un agente de policía para llevarla ante la autoridad a responder de una falta imprecisa. Acababa de sentir la terrible presencia de aquel Dios, al que siempre creyó muy lejos, y que ahora veía a su lado y hasta le parecía que Jesús la estaba mirando, aunque ella no pudiese verle. Dinah tenía una profunda convicción, común entre los metodistas, de las manifestaciones visibles de Jesús, y lograba comunicarla a sus oyentes de un modo irresistible. Les hacía sentir la seguridad de que se hallaba corporalmente entre ellos y que en cualquier momento se les aparecería de un modo u otro para despertar la angustia y la penitencia en sus corazones.

—¡Mirad! —exclamó la predicadora, volviéndose hacia la izquierda con los ojos fijos en un punto sobre las cabezas de la gente—. Mirad dónde se encuentra nuestro bendito Señor, que llora y extiende los brazos hacia vosotros. Oíd lo que dice: «¡Cuántas veces habría querido ampararos, como la gallina protege a los polluelos bajo las alas! ¡Y vosotros no quisisteis…! ¡Y vosotros no quisisteis…!» —repitió en tono de suplicante reproche y volviendo de nuevo la mirada hacia sus oyentes—. Ved las huellas de los clavos en sus manos y en sus pies. Vuestros pecados se los clavaron. ¡Qué pálido y desencajado está su rostro! Sufrió toda la agonía posible en el huerto, cuando su alma estaba agobiada por el dolor y por la muerte, y las grandes gotas de sudor caían al suelo semejantes a gotas de sangre. Y le escupieron, le abofetearon, le azotaron y se burlaron de Él, y luego, sobre sus doloridos hombros, cargaron la pesada cruz. Más tarde le clavaron en ella. ¡Ah, qué dolor! Sus labios estaban secos y sedientos, y aún en su gran agonía se burlaban de Él; no obstante, con aquellos labios resecos oraba por ellos, diciendo: «Padre mío, perdónales, porque no saben lo que hacen». Luego le envolvió el horror de las tinieblas y sintió lo mismo que los pecadores cuando

se ven alejados de Dios para siempre. Ésa fue la última gota en la copa de la amargura. «¡Dios mío, Dios mío!», exclamó. «¿Por qué me has abandonado?».

»¡Y todo eso lo sufrió por vosotros! ¡Por vosotros! Y, sin embargo, vosotros no pensáis en Él. Por vosotros… que le volvéis la espalda, sin importaros lo que sufrió por vuestra causa. Sin embargo, aun no está cansado de sufrir por vuestra causa, porque se levantó entre los muertos, y a la diestra de Dios Padre suplicó: "Padre, perdónales, porque no saben lo que hacen". Y también está en la tierra, entre nosotros, cerca de vosotros en este momento. Yo veo su cuerpo herido y su amorosa mirada.

Entonces Dinah se volvió a Bess Cranage, cuya alegre juventud y evidente vanidad le habían infundido la mayor compasión:

—¡Pobre muchacha! ¡Pobre niña! Está rogándote, y tú no le haces caso. Sólo piensas en pendientes, en trajes y en gorros bonitos, y no te acuerdas siquiera de que el Salvador murió por salvar tu alma preciosa. Vendrá el día en que estarás arrugada, con el cabello gris, con tu pobre cuerpo flaco y tembloroso. Entonces empezarás a darte cuenta de que tu alma no está a salvo. Entonces tendrás que presentarte ante Dios, vestida con tus pecados, con tus accesos de malhumor y tus vanos pensamientos. Y Jesús, que ahora esta dispuesto a ayudarte, no te ayudará entonces, y como no quieres que sea tu Salvador, se convertirá en tu juez. Ahora te mira con amor y misericordia y dice: «Venid a mí para gozar de la vida eterna». Pero luego se alejará de ti, y dirá: «Apartaos de mí para hundiros en el fuego eterno».

Los grandes y negros ojos de Bess, abiertos en extremo, empezaron a llenarse de lágrimas, palidecieron sus mejillas y sus labios, y todo el rostro quedó alterado y convulso, como el de los niños que están a punto de llorar.

—¡Ah! ¡Pobre y ciega niña! —prosiguió Dinah—. ¡Que no te suceda lo que le ocurrió a una servidora de Dios en los días de su vanidad! Ella no pensaba más que en gorros de encaje y ahorraba todo el dinero posible para comprarlos; no pensaba siquiera en tener el corazón limpio y el alma pura, pues sólo deseaba tener mejores encajes que las demás muchachas. Y un día, cuando se puso un nuevo gorrito y se miró al espejo, vio un rostro ensangrentado y coronado de espinas. Este mismo rostro es el que te está contemplando —y Dinah señaló un lugar muy cercano a Bessy—. ¡Ah! ¡Arráncate esas galas y arrójalas lejos de ti, como si fuesen venenosas víboras! ¡Te están mordiendo, están envenenando tu alma, te arrastran a un pozo oscuro y sin fondo en el que te hundirás para siempre y cada vez más, así como también cada vez más lejos de la luz y de Dios!

Bessy no pudo resistir más. Se apoderó de ella un terror extraordinario y, arrancándose los pendientes de las orejas, los arrojó ante ella, sollozando a gritos. Su padre, Chad, temeroso de que la predicadora se metiera con él, pues la conducta de la rebelde Bess le parecía debida a un milagro, se alejó rápidamente y empezó a dar martillazos en el yunque diciéndose: «A la gente le conviene herrar los caballos, tanto si predica alguien como si no. Es seguro que el diablo no me cogerá porque yo me dedique al trabajo».

Entonces Dinah empezó a describir las alegrías reservadas a los penitentes y con sus sencillas palabras habló de la paz divina y del amor que llenan el alma del creyente, y de que el amor de Dios convierte la pobreza en riqueza y satisface el alma de modo que desaparecen los deseos malsanos, los temores y la alarma; que, al fin, la misma tentación del pecado se extingue, y ya en la tierra comienza el cielo, porque ninguna nube se interpone entre el alma y Dios, que es el sol eterno.

—Queridos amigos —dijo por fin—, hermanos y hermanas, a quienes amo como aquellos por quienes murió mi Dios, creedme cuando os digo que conozco ese estado de bendición y, como lo conozco, deseo que lo compartáis conmigo. Soy pobre como vosotros. He de vivir gracias al trabajo de mis manos, pero no existe ningún señor ni ninguna dama que puedan ser tan felices como yo si en sus almas no existe, como en la mía, el amor de Dios. Fijaos lo que significa no odiar a nadie ni a otra cosa que el pecado; estar penetrado de amor por toda criatura; no tener nada; estar seguro de que todas las cosas se convertirán en bien; no dar importancia al dolor, porque tal es la voluntad de nuestro Padre; saber que nada, ni siquiera en el caso de que la tierra se incendiase o las aguas viniesen a ahogarnos, que nada en absoluto puede separarnos de Dios, que nos ama y que llena nuestras almas de paz y de alegría porque estamos seguros de que todo lo que Él quiere es santo, justo y bueno.

»Queridos amigos, venid a tomar parte de esta bendición que se os ofrece. Éstas son las buenas nuevas que Jesús vino a predicar a los pobres. No son como las riquezas de este mundo, que cuantas más se conquistan, menos descanso se tiene. Dios es eterno y también lo es su amor.

Sus rayos llegan a toda la creación
porque su fuerza es enorme;
bastan a todos y a cada uno

y bastan para siempre.

Dinah había estado hablando por espacio de una hora y la luz rojiza del día que acababa pareció dar una importancia extraordinaria a sus palabras finales. El viajero, a quien había interesado el curso de su sermón como si hubiera presenciado una representación dramática, pues hay cierta fascinación en toda elocuencia sincera e impremeditada que descubre el drama interior de las emociones del orador, hizo que su caballo tomase de nuevo el camino y prosiguió el viaje mientras Dinah decía: «Vamos a cantar un poco, mis queridos amigos». Y cuando el viajero descendía por la pendiente, llegaron a sus oídos las voces de los metodistas, elevándose y descendiendo en aquella extraña mezcla de entusiasmo y de tristeza propia de la cadencia de un himno.

III

Después del sermón

Menos de una hora después del sermón, Seth Bede caminaba al lado de Dinah por el sendero bordeado de setos que corría a través de los pastos y los verdes campos de trigo situados entre el pueblo y Hall Farm. Dinah se había quitado nuevamente su gorrito cuáquero y lo sostenía en sus manos para gozar de la frescura del crepúsculo, y Seth, mientras andaba a su lado, podía contemplar claramente la expresión de su rostro, mientras pensaba tímidamente en algo que quería decirle. En el rostro de la joven había una expresión de plácida e inconsciente gravedad; parecía absorta en pensamientos que nada tenían que ver con el momento actual ni con su propia personalidad: una expresión desalentadora en extremo para un enamorado. Incluso su modo de andar era desalentador pues tenía aquella apacible elasticidad que no necesita la ayuda de nadie. Seth, que lo comprendía vagamente, pensó: «Es demasiado buena y santa para cualquier hombre, exceptuándome a mí, tal vez». Y las palabras que había reunido retrocedieron antes de llegar a sus labios. Pero una idea le dio valor: «No existe hombre que pueda quererla más que yo y que la deje más libre de seguir la obra de Dios». Habían guardado silencio durante varios minutos, después de haber hablado de Bess Cranage. Dinah parecía haber olvidado la presencia de Seth y su paso se apresuraba tanto que la idea de estar ya a pocos minutos de distancia de las puertas de Hall Farm dio al fin a Seth el valor suficiente para hablar.

—¿Está ya decidida, Dinah, a volver el sábado a Snowfield?

—Sí —contestó la joven—. Me han llamado. Mientras meditaba el domingo por la noche, vi con toda claridad que la hermana de Alien, que está enferma, me necesita. La vi con la misma claridad con que estamos viendo esa nubecilla blanca, y cómo levantó su mano flaca para llamarme. Esta mañana, al abrir la Biblia en busca de consejo, mis ojos se fijaron en las palabras que dicen: «Y en cuanto hubimos contemplado la visión, nos apresuramos a ir a Macedonia». Si no fuese por esta clara indicación de la voluntad de Dios, no tendría prisa en ir allá, porque mi corazón me inclinaría a acompañar a mi tía y a sus hijitos, y a esa pobre oveja errante de Hetty Sorrel. Últimamente he rezado mucho por ella, y creo que aún podrá gozar de la misericordia divina.

—Dios lo quiera —dijo Seth—, porque el corazón de Adam está tan prendado de ella que nunca podrá fijarse en ninguna otra mujer. Aunque yo sentiría en el alma que se casara con ella, porque no creo que pueda hacerle feliz. No deja de ser un profundo misterio el camino que toma el corazón de un hombre cuando elige a una mujer entre todas las demás que ha visto en el mundo, y cuando le resulta más fácil trabajar siete años por ella, como Jacob hizo por Raquel, que conseguir a otra mujer cualquiera sin más trabajo que solicitarla. Muchas veces pienso en las palabras: «Y Jacob sirvió siete años por Raquel; y a él sólo le parecieron unos días por el amor que sentía por ella». Estas palabras serían ciertas con respecto a mí, Dinah, si me diera la esperanza de conquistarla en cuanto hubiesen trascurrido siete años. Sé que le parecerá que un marido ocuparía una parte demasiado considerable de sus pensamientos, porque san Pablo dice: «La que se casa cuida de las cosas del mundo para complacer a su marido». Y quizás me creerá demasiado atrevido cuando le hablo de eso, después de lo que me dijo el sábado pasado acerca de sus ideas. Mas he pensado en ello día y noche, y he rezado para no dejarme cegar por mis propios deseos y para no creer que lo que es bueno para mí ha de ser bueno también para usted. E incluso creo que hay más textos que aconsejan el matrimonio que los que pudieran encontrarse en contra de él. Porque san Pablo dice en otro lugar, con la mayor claridad: «Deseo que las mujeres jóvenes se casen, tengan hijos, gobiernen la casa y no den ocasión a que las censure nadie». Y luego: «Dos son mejor que uno». Lo cual se refiere tanto al

matrimonio como a otras cosas, porque nosotros, querida Dinah, tendríamos un solo corazón y una sola mente. Ambos servimos al mismo Señor y luchamos por tener iguales dones; yo nunca sería el marido que exigiera de usted lo que pudiera interrumpir la obra para la que Dios la ha creado. Por mi parte le daría toda la libertad posible, más de la que ahora goza, puesto que en la actualidad ha de ganarse la vida, y yo soy lo bastante fuerte para trabajar para los dos.

Como Seth había empezado ya a defender su causa, continuó con la mayor vehemencia y casi con apresuramiento, a fin de impedir que Dinah pronunciase alguna palabra decisiva antes de que él expusiera todos los argumentos que tenía preparados. Mientras hablaba se sonrojaron sus mejillas, se llenaron de lágrimas sus ojos grises y bondadosos y la voz le temblaba al pronunciar la última frase. Habían llegado a un paso estrecho, ente dos altas rocas, que en Loamshire hacía las veces de portillo. Dinah se detuvo para mirar a Seth y, con su voz tierna, tranquila y fina, le dijo:

—Le doy las gracias, Seth Bede, por su amor hacia mí, y si yo fuese capaz de pensar en un hombre de otro modo que como un hermano en Cristo, no hay duda de que pensaría en usted. Pero mi corazón no está libre y no puedo casarme. Eso queda para otras mujeres, puesto que no deja de ser algo grande y una bendición el ser esposa y madre. Pero «así como Dios ha distribuido a todo hombre, también ha llamado a cada uno y, por consiguiente, conviene dejarle obrar». Dios me ha llamado para que sea ministro de los demás, no para tener alegrías o pesares propios, sino para regocijarme con los que están alegres y llorar con los tristes. Me ha llamado para que predique sus palabras y Él es el dueño de mi trabajo. Y solamente obligada por una clara visión puedo abandonar a mis hermanos y hermanas de Snowfield, que han sido tan poco favorecidos por los bienes de este mundo. Allí los árboles son tan escasos que hasta un niño puede contarlos, y la vida en invierno es muy dura para los pobres. A mí me ha sido concedido el ayudarles y el consolarles, el dar ánimos a ese pequeño rebaño y llamar a los que van errantes; y mi alma está llena de estas cosas desde que me levanto hasta que me acuesto. Mi vida es demasiado corta y la obra de Dios excesivamente grande para que piense en constituir mi propio hogar en este mundo. No he escuchado sus palabras con oídos sordos, Seth, porque al ver que me dedicaba su amor, pensé que ello podría ser una indicación de la Providencia para que cambiase el camino de mi vida y nos ayudásemos mutuamente. Por eso dejé la decisión a mi Señor, pero cuantas veces trataba de fijar mi mente en el matrimonio y en nuestra vida en común, se interponían otros pensamientos; recordaba las veces en que he rezado con los enfermos y moribundos y las felices horas que pasé predicando, cuando mi corazón estaba lleno de amor y la Palabra me era concedida con toda abundancia. Y al abrir la Biblia en busca de consejo, siempre he encontrado alguna palabra clarísima que me indica cuál es mi tarea. Creo, Seth, lo que dice, que procuraría ser un auxiliar mío y no un obstáculo para mi obra; pero comprendo que Dios no quiere nuestro matrimonio, pues conduce a mi corazón por otro camino. Deseo vivir y morir sin marido ni hijos. Al parecer, no hay en mi alma lugar para mis propias necesidades y temores, pues Dios ha querido llenar mi corazón con las necesidades y sufrimientos de los pobres.

Seth se sintió incapaz de contestar y continuaron en silencio. Por fin, cuando ya estaban cerca de la puerta del patio, dijo:

—Está bien, Dinah, trataré de encontrar fuerza para soportarlo y para ver a Dios invisible. Ahora comprendo, sin embargo, qué débil es mi fe. Me parece que cuando se marche usted ya no podré estar contento ni alegrarme por nada. Lo que siento es, al parecer, algo superior al amor por una mujer, porque me contentaría, aun cuando no se casara conmigo, con ir a vivir a Snowfield y estar a su lado. Confié en que el intenso amor que Dios me inspiró por usted sería, para ambos, un camino; mas, al parecer, sólo es una prueba para mí. Quizás siento por usted más de lo que debería sentir por cualquier criatura, ya que muchas veces no tengo más remedio que decir de usted como el himno:

Si aparece en profundas sombras
ya ha empezado mi aurora.
Es la brillante estrella de la mañana de mi alma
y también es mi sol naciente.

»Tal vez esté equivocado y me convenga obrar de otro modo; pero supongo que no se enfadaría conmigo si las cosas ocurriesen de manera que yo pudiese abandonar este país para ir a vivir a Snowfield.

—No, Seth, le aconsejo esperar con paciencia y no abandonar a la ligera su país y sus parientes. No haga nada sin orden expresa y clara del Señor. Aquélla es una región estéril y pobre, no como este país de Goshen[2] al que está acostumbrado. No debemos tener impaciencia por escoger y decidir por nosotros mismos, sino esperar y dejarnos guiar.

—Supongo, sin embargo, que me permitirá escribirle una carta, en caso de desear decirle algo.

—Sin duda, infórmeme de sus dificultades y preocupaciones. Por lo demás, le aseguro que siempre estará en mis oraciones.

Habían llegado ya a la puerta del patio y Seth dijo:

—No quiero entrar, Dinah; por consiguiente, adiós. —Se detuvo y vaciló después de que ella le hubo dado la mano, y añadió—: Cabe en lo posible que dentro de algún tiempo vea las cosas de un modo distinto. Quizás tenga alguna nueva indicación.

—Dejemos eso, Seth. Conviene vivir un solo momento a la vez, según he leído en uno de los libros del señor Wesley. Ni a usted ni a mí nos corresponde hacer planes. Lo único que debemos procurar es obedecer y esperar. Adiós.

Dinah oprimió su mano con una mirada triste en sus ojos cariñosos y luego atravesó la puerta mientras Seth se volvía para dirigirse despacio a su casa. Pero en vez de tomar el camino directo, resolvió volver a través de los campos y por los mismos lugares que acababa de recorrer en compañía de Dinah, y creo que su pañuelo azul estaba empapado de lágrimas antes de comprender que ya era hora de encaminarse a casa sin demora. No tenía más que veintitrés años y acababa de saber lo que es el amor. El amor que, a la vez, es adoración que el hombre joven profesa a la mujer a quien considera más grande y mejor que él mismo. Un amor así apenas se diferencia del sentimiento religioso. Es el amor profundo y digno, ya se dedique a una mujer, a un niño, al arte o a la música. Nuestras caricias, nuestras tiernas palabras, nuestro éxtasis bajo la influencia de las puestas de sol otoñales, de la contemplación de una columnata o de majestuosas estatuas, o bajo el efecto de las sinfonías de Beethoven, todo eso trae consigo la sensación de que son solamente ondulaciones de un océano de amor y de belleza insondable. Nuestra emoción, en el momento de mayor exaltación, se expresa través del silencio. Nuestro amor, en su momento culminante, va más allá de su objeto y se pierde al sentir el misterio divino. Y este don bendito de amor, que, al mismo tiempo, venera, ha sido concedido a muchos humildes artesanos, desde que empezó el mundo, para que no nos sorprendamos de que existiese también en el alma de un carpintero metodista, hace más de cincuenta años, cuando aún se percibía el resplandor del tiempo en que Wesley y sus compañeros de trabajo se alimentaban con los frutos del escaramujo y las acerolas de los setos de Cornualles, después de fatigar sus miembros y sus pulmones llevando el divino mensaje a oídos de los pobres.

Aquel resplandor lejano se ha desvanecido ya; y el cuadro que podemos pintar en nuestra imaginación sobre el metodismo no es ya un anfiteatro de verdes colinas, ni la sombra profunda proyectada por los sicómoros de anchas hojas donde una multitud de hombres rudos y mujeres de corazón fatigado bebían una fe que, en realidad, era cultura rudimentaria, que fundía sus pensamientos con el pasado, elevaba sus imaginaciones sobre los detalles sórdidos de sus angustiadas vidas y llenaba sus almas con el sentimiento de una Presencia compasiva, amante e infinita, dulce como el verano para el necesitado que carece de hogar. Es muy posible que para algunos de mis lectores el metodismo no signifique nada más que calles sórdidas de casas bajas, abaceros rollizos, predicadores gorrones y un lenguaje hipócrita, elementos que, en ciertos barrios elegantes, son vistos como un exhaustivo análisis del metodismo.

Eso sería una lástima, porque no puedo pretender que Seth y Dinah fuesen algo más que metodistas. Y tampoco que perteneciesen al tipo moderno que lee revistas trimestrales y asiste a las funciones religiosas de las capillas provistas de pórticos y columnas; y tampoco quiero dar a entender que perteneciesen a una clase distinguida y secular. Creían en los milagros, en conversiones instantáneas, en revelaciones a través de los sueños y las visiones; echaban suertes y buscaban el consejo divino abriendo la Biblia al azar. Tenían un modo literal de interpretar las Escrituras que no sancionan los comentaristas ortodoxos; y me resulta imposible dar a entender que su dicción fuese correcta o liberal su instrucción. Sin embargo, si he leído debidamente la historia religiosa, la fe, la esperanza y la caridad no han existido siempre en relación directa con la mayor o menor sensibilidad hacia estas tres virtudes; y es posible, a Dios gracias, sostener teorías muy erróneas y poseer sentimientos sublimes. El tocino rancio que la torpe Molly separa de su escasa provisión para llevarlo a casa de su vecino, a fin de curar los ataques de su niño, puede ser quizás un remedio eficaz; pero el movimiento generoso y la bondad que inspiró el acto poseen una radiación beneficiosa que no se pierde.

Teniendo en cuenta todo eso, no podemos considerar a Dinah y a Seth indignos de nuestra simpatía, aunque estemos acostumbrados a llorar por los pesares más elevados de las heroínas que calzan zapatitos de satén y llevan miriñaque, o de los héroes que montan caballos casi salvajes y que, a su vez, sirven de montura para pasiones más salvajes todavía.

¡Pobre Seth! Jamás en su vida montó a caballo, excepto una vez, durante su infancia, cuando Jonathan Burge le subió en la grupa del suyo, diciéndole que se agarrase bien. Y así, en vez de prorrumpir en

palabras acusadoras contra Dios y el destino, mientras volvía a casa a la luz de las estrellas, resolvió contener su tristeza, no desear tanto hacer su voluntad y vivir más en beneficio del prójimo, como hacía Dinah.

IV

El hogar y sus tristezas

Era un verde valle con un arroyo que lo atravesaba, tan crecido a causa de las últimas lluvias que estaba a punto de desbordarse. Unos sauces no muy altos inclinaban sus ramas sobre la corriente, atravesada por un tablón por el que cruzaba entonces Adam Bede con paso firme, seguido de cerca por Gyp, que llevaba el cesto. Sin duda se dirigía hacia la casa con tejado de bálago, junto a la cual se veía un montón de madera, que se hallaba a unos veinte metros de distancia en la pendiente opuesta.

La puerta de la casa estaba abierta y desde ella miraba una mujer entrada en años; pero no contemplaba plácidamente el paisaje iluminado por el sol de la tarde; con ojos no muy claros observaba la manchita, cada vez mayor, que durante los últimos minutos le pareció que era su querido hijo Adam. Lisbeth Bede amaba a su hijo con el amor de una mujer que tiene a su primogénito en la madurez de su vida. Era una mujer llena de ansiedad, frugal, vigorosa, anciana y limpia como un copo de nieve. Su cabello gris estaba peinado hacia atrás y quedaba cubierto por un gorro de hilo, que rodeaba una faja negra; cubría su ancho pecho un pañuelo de color pardo y debajo de éste se divisaba una especie de bata de cuadros azules atada en la cintura y que descendía hasta las caderas, de las que partía una larga falda de hilo y lana. Lisbeth era alta como su hijo y guardaba una gran semejanza con él en muchos otros detalles. Sus ojos oscuros ya no eran muy transparentes, quizás de tanto llorar; pero sus cejas, anchas y bien dibujadas, seguían siendo negras, sus dientes firmes, y mientras, aún de pie, continuaba haciendo calceta rápida e inconscientemente con sus manos endurecidas por el trabajo, se mantenía tan erguida como cuando llevaba un cubo de agua en la cabeza desde la fuente. Tanto en la madre como en el hijo se observaba la misma figura e igual temperamento activo, pero Adam no había heredado de ella su frente ancha y su expresión de inteligencia y bondad.

Los parecidos familiares conllevan, a veces, una gran tristeza. La naturaleza, esa autora grande y trágica, nos relaciona por medio de los huesos y de los músculos y nos divide por el tejido mucho más sutil de nuestros cerebros; mezcla la simpatía y la repulsión, y ata nuestro corazón a los seres que nos molestan a cada momento. Oímos una voz que tiene el mismo timbre que la nuestra y que expresa las ideas que más nos molestan, y vemos ojos —¡ah, cuán parecidos a los de nuestra madre!— que se alejan de nosotros con la mayor frialdad; y nuestro último hijo querido nos sorprende con los movimientos y los gestos de la hermana de quien muchos años atrás nos separamos con gran amargura. El padre a quien debemos nuestra mejor herencia, el instinto mecánico, la aguda sensibilidad de la armonía, la habilidad inconsciente de la mano que modela, nos irrita y nos avergüenza con sus diarios errores; la madre perdida mucho tiempo atrás, cuyo rostro empezamos a ver en el espejo cuando aparecen nuestras primeras arrugas, muchas veces indignó nuestras almas juveniles con sus enfados y con sus insistencias poco razonables.

Se oyó una voz maternal, cariñosa y ansiosa a un tiempo cuando Lisbeth dijo:

—Bueno, hijo. Ya han dado las siete. Siempre eres el último en salir. Debes de querer cenar. ¿Dónde está Seth? Probablemente habrá ido a alguna ceremonia religiosa.

—No te preocupes por Seth, madre. ¿Dónde está padre? —preguntó rápidamente Adam al entrar en la casa y después de registrar con la mirada una habitación que había en la izquierda y que se utilizaba como taller—. ¿No ha hecho el ataúd para Tholer? Aquí veo la obra como la he dejado esta mañana.

—¿Que si ha hecho el ataúd? —Lisbeth siguió a su hijo sin dejar su labor ni de mirar al joven con ansiedad—. Se ha marchado a Treddleston y no ha vuelto. Supongo que ha ido de nuevo al Waggin Overtrow.

El rostro de Adam se congestionó de ira. Sin embargo no dijo una palabra, se quitó la chaqueta y se arremangó de nuevo.

—¿Qué vas a hacer, Adam? —preguntó la madre con cierta alarma—. ¿Supongo que no vas a trabajar sin haber cenado antes?

Adam, demasiado irritado para hablar, entró en el taller. Su madre abandonó entonces la labor de calceta y, acercándose a él, le cogió por el brazo y le dijo con un tono quejumbroso de reproche:

—No, hijo mío. Antes has de cenar. Tienes patatas con salsa, como a ti te gustan. Las he hecho expresamente para ti. Ven a cenar.

—Déjame en paz —replicó Adam con energía, librándose de su madre y tomando uno de los tablones que estaban apoyados en la pared—. No hay tiempo para cenas cuando hemos prometido tener listo el ataúd y entregarlo en Broxton mañana por la mañana a las siete. Ya tendría que estar acabado, y no se ha clavado ni un clavo. No estoy de humor para cenar.

—Pero comprende que hoy no vas a poder terminarlo —dijo Lisbeth—. Te vas a matar trabajando. Y no podrás descansar durante toda la noche.

—¿Qué importa el tiempo que tarde? ¿No hemos prometido el ataúd? ¿Acaso pueden enterrar el cadáver sin él? Antes me cortaría la mano que engañar a la gente de este modo. Sólo de pensarlo me vuelvo loco. Pero no pasará mucho tiempo antes de que acabe con todo eso, porque ya estoy harto.

La pobre Lisbeth no oía esa amenaza por primera vez y, de haber sido una mujer juiciosa, se hubiese alejado sin decir nada y habría procurado no hablar durante la hora siguiente. Pero una de las lecciones que la mujer aprende con más dificultad es la de no contradecir a un hombre enojado o borracho. Lisbeth se sentó en el banco de carpintero y empezó a llorar. Y en cuanto lo hubo hecho lo suficiente para conseguir una voz más lastimosa, dijo:

—No, hijo mío, no. No te marcharás, destrozando el corazón de tu madre y condenando a tu padre a la ruina. No querrás que me lleven al cementerio y tú no puedas acompañar mi cadáver. Yo misma no descansaría en paz en la tumba si no pudiera verte hasta el último momento de mi vida, porque ¿cómo podría hacerte saber la gravedad de mi estado si te hubieras marchado lejos, muy lejos, y Seth te siguiera? Porque tu padre no es capaz de manejar una pluma, pues la mano le tiembla en extremo y, además, no sabríamos tu paradero. Has de perdonar a tu padre y no guardarle rencor. Antes de que se entregara a la bebida era un buen padre para ti. Era un buen trabajador y recuerda que te enseñó tu oficio y que nunca me dio un golpe ni me dirigió una mala palabra… No, nunca lo ha hecho, ni aun estando borracho. Estoy segura que no querrías que tu propio padre acabe en un asilo de indigentes. Piensa que, hace veinticinco años, cuando tú eras todavía un niño de pecho, tu padre era un hombre muy bueno, hábil en toda clase de trabajos, como lo eres tú hoy.

La voz de Lisbeth aumentó en volumen, aunque la entrecortaban los sollozos, y empezó a proferir una especie de gemido, que es el más irritante de todos los ruidos cuando hay que soportar verdaderas penas y ejecutar algún trabajo. Por eso Adam exclamó impaciente:

—Ahora, madre, hazme el favor de no llorar y de no hablar de ese modo. ¿Acaso piensas que no tengo ya bastantes problemas? ¿Para qué me sirve que digas las mismas cosas que no consigo sacarme de la cabeza en todo el día? Y si no pensara en ellas, ¿por qué haría lo que hago, por el placer de ver que todo sigue igual? Pero me molesta que me hablen cuando no hace falta y, por otra parte, me conviene no malgastar las fuerzas en hablar, porque he de trabajar.

—Ya sé que te portas como nadie, hijo mío; pero eres duro con tu padre y siempre estás más enojado con él que con nadie. En cambio, todo lo de Seth te parece bien y te enfadas cuando yo le encuentro alguna falta.

—Eso es mejor que hablarle con suavidad y permitir que se comporte desagradablemente, ¿no crees? Si yo no le diese a entender mi disgusto, sería capaz de vender toda la madera que tenemos y de gastarse el dinero bebiendo. Sé de sobra que tengo deberes que cumplir con mi padre, pero de ninguna manera he de permitir que vaya derecho a la ruina. ¿Y qué tiene que ver Seth con todo eso? Que yo sepa, el pobre muchacho no hace ningún daño a nadie; y ahora, madre, déjame tranquilo, que tengo mucho trabajo.

Lisbeth no se atrevió a decirle nada más; se levantó y llamó a Gyp, deseosa de consolarse por la negativa de su hijo de tomar la cena que le había preparado con la esperanza de contemplarle amorosamente mientras comía, alimentando al perro de Adam con extraordinaria liberalidad. Sin embargo, Gyp observaba a su amo con cierta preocupación y las orejas erguidas, extrañado, tal vez, por el desacostumbrado curso que tomaban los acontecimientos; y aunque miraba a Lisbeth cuando ella le llamaba y movía intranquilo sus patas delanteras, pues sabía que la buena mujer le invitaba a cenar, se hallaba sumido en la mayor indecisión; y así, continuó sentado sobre su cuarto trasero y con los ojos fijos en su amo. Adam observó el

conflicto mental de Gyp, y aunque su enfado le había forzado a comportarse con su madre menos cariñoso que de costumbre, no impidió que cuidase como solía de su perro. Lo cierto es que estamos más inclinados a portarnos con bondad con los animales que nos quieren que con las mujeres que nos aman. ¿Será porque los primeros son mudos?

—Anda, ve, Gyp, ve —dijo Adam en tono alentador y autoritario a un tiempo.

Y Gyp, al parecer satisfecho de cumplir con su deber a la vez que satisfacía su placer, siguió a Lisbeth a la cocina.

Apenas había terminado su cena y acabado de lamer el plato, cuando volvió al lado de su amo, en tanto que Lisbeth se sentaba a solas, a fin de llorar sobre su labor de calceta. Las mujeres que nunca se muestran resentidas y amargadas son, con frecuencia, las más inaguantables, y si Salomón era tan sabio como dice la tradición, estoy seguro de que cuando comparó a la mujer pendenciera con la gota que continuamente cae en un día lluvioso, no lo dijo porque tuviera ante sus ojos a una furia de largas uñas, violenta y egoísta. Por el contrario, se refería a una buena mujer, que sólo era feliz con la dicha de las personas a quienes amaba, y a las que procuraba toda suerte de comodidades preparándoles los mejores bocados y sin gastar nada para sí misma. Es decir, una mujer como por ejemplo Lisbeth, que, a la vez, era paciente y amiga de quejarse, estaba desprovista de egoísmo pero no de exigencias, que se pasaba el día entero quejándose de lo que ocurrió el anterior y de lo que había de suceder el siguiente, y que, con gran facilidad, se echaba a llorar por lo bueno y por lo malo. Pero con su amor idólatra por Adam se confundía cierto respeto, y así, cuando él le ordenaba que le dejase en paz, se quedaba silenciosa.

Así trascurrieron las horas mientras resonaba el tictac del viejo reloj y el ruido de las herramientas de Adam. Por fin, éste pidió luz y un trago de agua (pues la cerveza sólo se bebía en día de fiesta) y Lisbeth, al servirle, se aventuró a decirle:

—Cuando quieras puedes cenar. Lo tienes todo preparado.

—No esperes, madre —contestó Adam con más afabilidad.

Ya le había pasado la cólera y deseaba mostrarse bondadoso con su madre. Por eso apeló de nuevo a su acento y dialecto nativo, que en otras ocasiones no empleaba.

—Ya veré a padre cuando vuelva a casa, aunque tal vez pase la noche fuera. Y entonces me gustaría mucho que estuvieses acostada.

—Esperaré hasta que vuelva Seth. Creo que no tardará.

El reloj señalaba entonces más de las nueve, pero iba adelantado. Antes de que dieran las diez, se levantó el picaporte y entró Seth. Había oído el ruido de las herramientas al acercarse a la casa.

—¿Qué ocurre, madre? —preguntó—. ¿Por qué trabaja padre a estas horas?

—El que trabaja no es tu padre y ya lo habrías notado si no vinieses con la cabeza llena de oraciones. Es tu hermano quien lo hace todo, porque los demás siempre encuentren la manera de no hacer nada.

Lisbeth se disponía a continuar, porque no temía a Seth y casi siempre vertía en sus oídos las quejas que se veía obligada a contener por el respeto que le inspiraba Adam. Seth en su vida había dirigido una palabra dura a su madre, y las personas tímidas siempre desahogan su malhumor en las afectuosas. Pero Seth, con ansiosa mirada, entró en el taller y dijo:

—¿Qué es eso, Adam? ¡Cómo! ¿Acaso padre se ha olvidado del ataúd?

—Ha ocurrido lo que siempre sucede, muchacho, pero yo lo terminaré —dijo Adam levantando los ojos y dirigiendo una brillante mirada a su hermano—. ¿Qué te pasa? Pareces preocupado.

Los ojos de Seth estaban enrojecidos y en su bondadoso rostro se advertía cierta depresión.

—Sí, Adam; pero hay que aguantarse, y no puedo remediarlo. ¿De modo que no has ido a la escuela?

—¿A la escuela? No. Eso puede esperar —contestó Adam.

—Déjame trabajar ahora a mí y así tú podrás acostarte —dijo Seth.

—No, muchacho, ya que estoy metido en harina prefiero continuar. Ya me ayudarás a llevarlo a Broxton cuando esté terminado. Te llamaré al amanecer. Ahora ve a cenar y cierra la puerta, para que no me molesten las palabras de nuestra madre.

Seth sabía muy bien que su hermano Adam jamás dejaba de realizar lo que dijera y que no había nadie capaz de hacerle desistir de sus propósitos. Por eso se volvió con el corazón apesadumbrado y entró en la cocina.

—Adam no ha comido siquiera un bocado desde que ha llegado a casa —dijo Lisbeth—. En cuanto a ti, supongo que habrás cenado con tus compañeros metodistas.

—Nada de eso, madre. No he cenado todavía.

—Pues entonces, ven —dijo Lisbeth—; pero no te comas las patatas, pues quizás a Adam le entren ganas de comérselas luego. Le gustan mucho con salsa. Hace un momento estaba tan irritado que no ha querido

comer, a pesar de que yo las he guisado expresamente para él. Me ha vuelto a amenazar con marcharse —continuó con voz quejumbrosa—, y estoy segura de que lo hará cualquier día sin avisar, antes de que yo me levante de la cama, y también sé que en cuanto se haya marchado no volverá a poner los pies en casa. Créeme que preferiría no haber tenido ningún hijo como él, que no tiene igual por su habilidad y su laboriosidad, que es tan bien considerado en todas partes, alto y erguido como un álamo, en caso de que tenga que verme separada de él y no vuelva a verlo en la vida.

—Vamos, madre, no te angusties en vano —dijo Seth con voz afable—. No hay ninguna razón para creer que Adam quiera marcharse y, en cambio, las hay muy buenas para tener la seguridad de que continuará a tu lado. Es posible que diga esas cosas cuando está enojado y has de reconocer que muchas veces le sobran motivos, pero su propio corazón le impediría marcharse. Recuerda cuánto nos ayudó cuando estábamos apurados, y cómo empleó sus ahorros en pagarme un sustituto para que no fuese al servicio militar, y también cómo compró tanta madera como le fue posible para que nuestro padre pudiera trabajar; y si obró así, no fue porque no supiera qué hacer del dinero. Ten en cuenta que hace ya mucho tiempo que habría podido casarse y establecerse casa propia. Pero no hay que tener miedo, porque no es hombre que se vuelva para derribar su propia obra y hasta ahora todo el empeño de su vida ha sido apoyar a su familia.

—No me hables de su matrimonio —dijo Lisbeth echándose a llorar otra vez—. Se ha enamorado de esa Hetty Sorrel, que es incapaz de ahorrar un penique y de demostrar el más mínimo respeto por mí. ¡Y pensar que habría podido casarse con Mary Burge, asociarse con el padre de ésta y ser una persona importante, que tuviese obreros a sus órdenes como el mismo maese Burge! Dolly me lo ha dicho varias veces. ¡Y si no fuese porque se ha enamorado de esa mozuela que no sirve para nada…! Él, en cambio, es un muchacho muy inteligente, que sabe escribir y calcular muy bien; pero el caso es que de poco le sirve todo eso.

—Pero, madre, ya sabes que los hombres no podemos querer a las mujeres que nos indiquen otras personas. Solamente Dios puede mandar en el corazón del hombre. Yo mismo podía haberme enamorado de ella y Adam de otra mujer, y por esta razón jamás le reprocharé lo que no puede impedir. Estoy convencido, sin embargo, de que él se esfuerza en vencer su inclinación. Pero nosotros hemos de procurar no hablar de eso, limitándonos a rogar al Señor que le bendiga y le dirija.

—Sí. Tú siempre estás dispuesto a rezar, y no sé qué sacas de tanto rezo. No por eso ganarás doble sueldo en la Navidad próxima. Los metodistas no son capaces de lograr que llegues a valer ni siquiera la mitad de lo que vale tu hermano, a pesar de tus esfuerzos de convertirte en predicador.

—Tienes mucha razón en lo que dices, madre —contestó Seth con afabilidad—. Adam vale mucho más que yo y por mí ha hecho bastante más de lo que yo hice nunca por él. Dios distribuye el talento y las habilidades entre los hombres según su voluntad. Pero no por eso has de desdeñar la oración. Es posible que no nos proporcione dinero, pero en cambio nos da algo que no pueden comprar las riquezas de la tierra, es decir, la facultad de alejarnos del pecado y de conformamos con la voluntad de Dios, cualquiera que sea la cosa que Él nos mande. Y si tú quisieras rogar a Dios que te ayudase, confiando en su bondad y misericordia, ten la certeza de que no estarías tan inquieta.

—¿Inquieta? Bastantes motivos tengo para estarlo. En cambio, tú jamás demuestras sentir inquietud. Te gastas todo cuanto ganas y nunca recuerdas que no tienes ningún dinero ahorrado para un día de apuro. Si Adam hubiese sido como tú, nunca habría tenido lo suficiente para pagarte un sustituto. ¡No pienses en el día de mañana, no te apures! Eso es lo que dices siempre. ¿Cuál es el resultado? En cambio Adam ha de pensar en el día de mañana y también en ti.

—Estas son palabras de la Biblia, madre —contestó Seth—. No significan que debamos ser perezosos, sino que no hemos de preocuparnos demasiado acerca de lo que ocurrirá mañana, pues tan sólo debemos cumplir nuestro deber y dejar lo demás a la voluntad de Dios.

—Sí. Tú siempre hablas de ese modo. No piensas en otra cosa que en las palabras de la Biblia. No comprendo cómo sabes que «el no pensar en el día de mañana» significa todo eso. La Biblia es un libro muy grande y tú no puedes haberlo leído entero, ni sabes elegir los versículos. Y me extraña que no encuentres en ella palabras que tengan un significado más agradable. Adam, por su parte, encontró en la Biblia un consejo muy bueno y que repite con gran frecuencia: «Ayúdate y Dios te ayudará».

—No, madre. Estas palabras no son de la Biblia. Se encuentran en un libro que Adam compró en la tienda de Treddleston. Lo escribió un hombre muy sabio, pero el libro es mundano, según creo. Sin embargo, ese consejo tiene razón en parte, porque la Biblia nos dice que debemos trabajar en unión de Dios.

—Bueno, ¿y qué sé yo? Parecen palabras de la Biblia. ¿Y a ti qué te pasa, muchacho? Apenas has cenado. ¿No quieres comer un poco más y tomar un pedazo de torta de avena? Estás blanco como el papel, ¿qué te pasa?

—Nada importante, madre. Es que no tengo apetito. Voy a ver a Adam y a proponerle que me deje

continuar la construcción del ataúd.

—Toma antes un poco de caldo —dijo Lisbeth, cuyos sentimientos maternales dominaron por un momento su costumbre de quejarse—. En un minuto te lo prepararé.

—No, madre, gracias. Eres muy buena —dijo Seth con gratitud. Y alentado por aquel tierno sentimiento, continuó—: Quisiera rezar contigo un poco por nuestro padre, por Adam y por todos nosotros. Es posible que esto te consuele más de lo que tú te figuras.

—Como quieras. No tengo por qué oponerme.

Aunque casi siempre Lisbeth se inclinaba a llevar la contra en sus conversaciones con Seth, tuvo entonces una vaga sensación de que encontraría consuelo a través de aquel acto de piedad y de que, de un modo u otro, obtendría algún alivio en sus apuros espirituales.

Así, madre e hijo se arrodillaron y Seth rogó por su desgraciado y errabundo padre y por todos los que en la casa no se preocupaban por él. Y cuando llegó la petición de que jamas Adam se sintiese inclinado a establecerse en otra comarca, sino que permaneciese al lado de su madre para hacer apacibles los días de ésta en su peregrinación por la tierra, los ojos de Lisbeth se llenaron de nuevo de lágrimas. Cuando se levantaron, Seth acudió de nuevo al lado de Adam y le dijo:

—¿Quieres hacerme el favor de descansar una o dos horas y dejar que yo continúe entre tanto?

—No, Seth, no. Haz que madre se meta en la cama y vete también a descansar.

Mientras tanto, Lisbeth se había secado los ojos y seguía a Seth llevando algo en las manos. Era un plato de color pardo y amarillo que contenía las patatas con salsa, así como unos pedacitos de carne que había picado y mezclado con aquéllas. En aquellos tiempos el pan de trigo y la carne fresca eran un lujo para los trabajadores. La buena mujer dejó el plato en el banco, al lado de Adam, y le dijo:

—Mientras trabajas, puedes ir picando. Te traeré otro vaso de agua.

—Sí, madre —contestó Adam con afabilidad—. Tengo mucha sed. Por espacio de media hora todo estuvo tranquilo. En la casa no se oía ningún ruido más que el fuerte tictac del reloj y el que producían las herramientas de Adam. Era una noche serena, y cuando el joven a las doce abrió la puerta para asomarse al exterior, sólo parecían moverse las estrellas, porque todos los tallos de hierba estaban dormidos.

El ejercicio físico y el trabajo suelen dejar nuestros pensamientos a merced de las sensaciones y de la imaginación. Esto fue lo que le ocurrió a Adam aquella noche. Mientras sus músculos trabajaban con gran actividad, su mente estaba poblada de escenas de un triste pasado y de un futuro probablemente no menos triste, que pasaban flotando ante él y se sucedían con rapidez.

Se imaginó lo que ocurriría a la mañana siguiente, cuando hubiese llevado el ataúd a Broxton y se viese de nuevo en su casa desayunando; tal vez su padre habría vuelto y estaría avergonzado ante la mirada de su hijo. El desgraciado se sentaría, pareciendo más viejo que nunca y más tembloroso que la mañana anterior, e inclinaría la cabeza y contemplaría las losas, en tanto que Lisbeth le preguntaría cómo se figuraba que se terminó el ataúd después de marcharse él dejándolo sin acabar. Hay que tener en cuenta que Lisbeth, pese a que censuraba la severidad de Adam con su padre, era siempre la primera en pronunciar palabras de reproche.

«Y así continuará, cada vez peor —pensó Adam—. Ya no es posible devolverle al buen camino, ni siquiera contenerle, porque ya ha empezado a descender».

Y recordó los días en que era todavía niño y corría al lado de su padre, orgulloso de ir a trabajar y más todavía de oír cómo su padre se envanecía ante sus compañeros de que «este pequeño tiene una habilidad extraordinaria en la carpintería». ¡Qué hombre tan activo y digno era entonces su padre! Cuando la gente preguntaba a Adam de quién era hijo, él contestaba con la mayor satisfacción «Soy hijo de Mathias Bede», seguro de que todos le conocían. ¿No construyó, acaso, el maravilloso palomar de la parroquia de Broxton? Aquellos eran días muy felices, especialmente cuando Seth, que tenía tres años menos que él, empezó a salir para trabajar a su vez y Adam era, al mismo tiempo, maestro y discípulo. Pero luego llegaron los días tristes, cuando Adam no había cumplido aún los veinte años, pues Mathias empezó a adquirir la costumbre de pasar las horas en las tabernas y Lisbeth, por consiguiente, lloraba en casa y exteriorizaba sus quejas sin tratar de evitar que la oyeran sus hijos.

Adam recordaba muy bien la noche de vergüenza y de angustia en que, por primera vez, vio a su padre borracho, cantando una canción en compañía de sus compañeros embriagados en el Waggin Overthrow. Al cumplir los dieciocho años se escapó de su casa un amanecer llevando un fardo con su ropa y el libro de medidas en el bolsillo, decidido a no aguantar más las humillaciones de su casa. Se dijo que iría a buscar fortuna y que en cuanto se hallase en una bifurcación del camino pondría el bastón de pie en el suelo y tomaría la dirección según el lado en que cayese. Mas al llegar a Stoniton el recuerdo de su madre y de Seth, que se quedaban en casa, obligados a soportar todos los pesares sin el apoyo que él podía darles

resultó intolerable y le faltó resolución. Regresó al día siguiente, y desde entonces le remordía la conciencia por el disgusto y el terror que su madre había sufrido durante aquellos dos días.

«No —se dijo Adam aquella noche—. Eso no ha de volver a suceder. Y sería una pobre compensación si, al terminar la vida, supiese que mi pobre madre murió en la miseria y en la desolación. Mi espalda y mis hombros son bastante fuertes y robustos; daría muestras de ser un cobarde marchándome y dejando que las penas agobiasen a quienes son menos fuertes para soportarlas. "Los fuertes han de cargar con las enfermedades de los débiles y no pensar solamente en divertirse". Estas palabras no necesitan ninguna explicación, pues son extraordinariamente claras. Y es evidente también que, cuando solamente se persigue el placer en este mundo, se sigue un camino equivocado. Un cerdo puede meter la cabeza en la artesa sin pensar en nada más; pero cuando se tiene el corazón y el alma de un hombre, hay que pensar en otras cosas y no sólo en uno mismo. No, no; nunca separaré mi cuello del yugo para que los más débiles arrastren la carga. Mi padre es para mí una cruz y seguirá siéndolo durante muchos años. Pero ¡qué importa! Tengo salud, vigor y ánimo para soportarla».

En aquel momento se oyó en la puerta un leve roce como de ramita de sauce, y Gyp, en vez de ladrar, como habría podido esperarse, profirió un largo aullido; Adam, muy sobresaltado, fue en el acto hacia la puerta y la abrió. En el exterior no había nada ni nadie. Todo estaba tranquilo como una hora antes; las hojas continuaban inmóviles y la luz de las estrellas mostraba con gran claridad los apacibles campos que había a un lado y otro del arroyo, privados en aquel instante de todo movimiento y de vida. Adam dio una vuelta en torno de la casa y no vio nada más que una rata que se metió entre los matorrales cuando él pasó. Volvió de nuevo al taller, preguntándose cuál habría sido la causa del ruido; éste era tan especial, que en el momento había despertado en él la idea de una varita de sauce tocando en la puerta. No pudo contener un ligero estremecimiento, pues recordó con cuánta frecuencia su madre le había dicho que se oye ese ruido cuando alguien va a morir. Adam no era supersticioso, pero por sus venas corría la sangre de los campesinos y de los artesanos, y un campesino no puede evitar creer en ciertas supersticiones, lo mismo que un caballo no puede evitar el temblor de su cuerpo cuando ve un camello. Además, su mente ofrecía la curiosa combinación de humillarse en la región del misterio y de ser muy activa, fría y razonable en la del conocimiento. La profundidad de su reverencia era tan grande como la de su sentido común, y muchas veces contenía los argumentos espiritualistas de Seth diciéndole: «Si, hay grandes misterios y tú apenas conoces una mínima parte de ellos». Y así se daba el caso de que Adam era, a la vez, sagaz y crédulo. Si se desplomara una casa recién construida y le hubiesen dicho que ello se debía a un castigo divino, él habría contestado: «Puede ser, pero la inclinación del tejado y de las paredes no era la debida; de lo contrario, eso no habría ocurrido». Sin embargo, creía en los sueños y en los pronósticos, y hasta el día de su muerte se sentiría inundado de un sudor frío cuando refiriera la historia de la varita de sauce que había llamado a su puerta esa noche.

Pero Adam, en la necesidad de acabar el ataúd, tenía el mejor antídoto contra el miedo imaginario, y durante los diez minutos siguientes, su martillo resonó de un modo tan continuado, que habría apagado cualquier otro ruido en caso de haber existido. Sin embargo, hubo un momento de pausa al coger la regla y, en aquel instante, volvió a oír la extraña llamada y nuevamente Gyp profirió un aullido. Adam abrió la puerta sin perder un instante, pero, como antes, todo estaba tranquilo y la luz de las estrellas no le permitía ver otra cosa sino la hierba cargada de rocío que crecía en tomo a la casa.

Por un momento Adam pensó en su padre con alguna inquietud. En los últimos tiempos nunca regresaba de Treddleston después de anochecer, aunque había muchas razones para creer que estaría durmiendo el vino en el Waggin Overthrow. Además, para Adam la concepción del futuro era tan inseparable de la lastimosa imagen de su padre que el miedo de que pudiese ocurrirle algún accidente fatal quedaba excluido por el constante temor a su degradación continua. La siguiente idea que se le ocurrió le obligó a descalzarse y a subir en silencio la escalera para escuchar detrás de las puertas de los dormitorios, pero tanto Seth como su madre respiraban con regularidad.

Luego bajó la escalera y se entregó de nuevo al trabajo, diciéndose: «No volveré a abrir la puerta, pues no sirve de nada intentar averiguar la causa de ese ruido. Quizás exista un mundo superior al nuestro, al que no podemos ver, pero del que el oído, que es más rápido que la vista, perciba de vez en cuando alguno de sus ruidos. Ciertas personas creen percibir algo de él pero, en general, son gentes cuyos ojos no les sirven de gran cosa. Por mi parte, creo que vale más saber apreciar si una línea es perpendicular o no que ser capaz de ver un espectro».

Tales ideas adquirieron mayor peso a medida que aumentaba la luz del día, debilitando el resplandor de las luces artificiales, y también en cuanto empezaron a cantar los pájaros. En el momento en que la rojiza luz del sol brilló sobre los clavos de latón que formaban las iniciales de la tapa del ataúd, la impresión

agorera del roce oído en la puerta quedó olvidada ante la satisfacción que le producía la idea de haber terminado el trabajo y cumplido con su compromiso. No había necesidad de llamar a Seth, pues ya le oía moverse en el piso superior; en efecto, tardó muy poco en bajar la escalera.

—Ahora, muchacho —saludó Adam en cuanto Seth apareció por la puerta—, el ataúd ya está terminado; podemos llevarlo a Broxton y volver antes de las seis y media. Tomaré un poco de torta de avena y saldremos.

Pronto el ataúd estuvo sobre los fornidos hombros de los dos hermanos, que emprendieron el camino seguidos por Gyp y salieron del patio trasero de la casa para tomar el sendero. Tenían que recorrer cosa de dos kilómetros y medio para llegar a Broxton, que se hallaba en la vertiente opuesta, y su camino serpenteaba de un modo muy agradable a través de los campos y por senderos aromatizados por las madreselvas y por los escaramujos, en tanto que los pájaros piaban y cantaban en los altos y frondosos chaparros y olmos. Era un espectáculo muy hermoso el que ofrecía el despertar de la mañana estival en ese paisaje paradisíaco por el que atravesaban los dos fornidos hermanos, en sus trajes de faena y llevando en hombros el ataúd. Se detuvieron por última vez ante una pequeña granja situada a la entrada del pueblo de Broxton. A las seis de la madrugada quedó terminado su cometido, clavado el ataúd, y Adam y Seth pudieron emprender el regreso a casa. Para ello escogieron un camino más corto, que les obligaría a atravesar los campos y el arroyo que corría por delante de su casa. Adam no había mencionado a Seth lo ocurrido durante la noche, pero aún estaba bastante impresionado y le dijo:

—Mira, Seth, si nuestro padre no ha regresado a la hora del desayuno, creo que lo mejor será que vayas a buscarle a Treddleston; de paso podrás traerme el alambre de latón que necesito. No te importe perder una hora de trabajo, porque ya la compensaremos. ¿Qué te parece?

—No tengo inconveniente —contestó Seth—. Pero mira las nubes que se han reunido en el cielo desde que salimos. Sin duda tendremos más lluvia. Será una lástima, porque no se podrá trabajar el heno si los campos quedan cubiertos de agua. Ahora el arroyo está bastante crecido, pero un día más de lluvia cubrirá el puente y tendremos que dar un rodeo por el camino.

A la sazón atravesaban el valle y habían entrado en el prado que cruzaba el arroyo.

—¿Qué es aquel bulto que hay junto al sauce? —preguntó Seth echando a correr al mismo tiempo.

Adam tuvo un profundo sobresalto y la ansiedad imprecisa que había sentido con respecto a su padre se convirtió en un temor definido. No contestó a Seth, pero echó a correr, precedido por Gyp, que empezó a ladrar con inquietud. Y así, un momento más tarde, ambos hermanos se hallaban junto al puente.

¡Así que el augurio era cierto! Su pobre padre de cabellos grises, en quien pocas horas antes había pensado con dureza, como en una espina clavada en su costado, quizá estaba ya entonces luchando contra la muerte que le acechaba en el agua. Esta fue la primera idea que atravesó la conciencia de Adam antes de tener tiempo de agarrar la chaqueta y sacar a tierra el cuerpo largo y pesado. Seth estaba ya a su lado, ayudándole, y en cuanto hubieron llevado el cadáver a la orilla, los dos hermanos se arrodillaron y miraron asustados los ojos vidriosos de su padre, olvidando la necesidad de hacer algo, olvidándolo todo, a excepción de que su padre estaba muerto frente a ellos. Adam fue el primero en hablar en un susurro:

—Voy a ver a nuestra madre. En un momento estaré de vuelta.

La pobre Lisbeth estaba muy ocupada preparando el desayuno de sus hijos, y en el fuego humeaba el potaje que les había hecho. Su cocina estaba siempre extremadamente limpia, pero aquella mañana la buena mujer se esforzaba más que nunca en conseguir que tanto el hogar como la mesa fuesen más atractivos.

—Los muchachos tendrán hambre —dijo para sí, aunque en voz alta, mientras revolvía el potaje—. Hay un buen trecho de aquí a Broxton y en la colina sopla un airecillo que despierta el apetito… Sin tener en cuenta que iban cargados con el ataúd. Pero aun pesará más después de haber metido en él al pobre Bob Tholer. Sin embargo, esta mañana he hecho un potaje más abundante y más bueno que nunca. También es posible que el padre se presente de un momento a otro, aunque él, en realidad, no come mucho. En cambio bebe bastante cerveza. Así se gasta los cuartos, como le he dicho muchas veces y volveré a decirle antes de que acabe el día. La verdad es que el pobre no me contesta nunca, tengo que reconocerlo.

Pero Lisbeth había oído ya el ruido de precipitados pasos sobre la hierba, y al volverse rápidamente hacia la puerta, vio entrar a Adam, y le pareció tan pálido y asustado que no pudo menos que echarse a gritar y acercarse a él antes de que tuviese tiempo de empezar a hablar.

—¡Deprisa, madre! —exclamó Adam con voz ronca—. No te asustes. Padre se ha caído al agua. Creo que podremos reanimarlo. Seth y yo vamos a traerlo enseguida. Prepara una manta y caliéntala.

En realidad, Adam no dudaba de que su padre estaba muerto, pero comprendió que el único modo de contener el dolor de su madre consistía en procurar que se ocupase de algo que le infundiera esperanzas.

Volvió al lado de Seth y los dos hijos levantaron la triste carga en sucio y con los corazones apenados. Aquellos ojos abiertos y vidriosos grises como los de Seth, más de una vez habían contemplado odiosos a los mismos muchachos ante los cuales Mathias inclinaría la cabeza impulsado por la vergüenza. Los sentimientos principales de Seth eran el sobresalto y el dolor por la repentina muerte de su madre, pero Adam recordaba los tiempos pasados y sentía a la vez compasión y cariño. Cuando llega la muerte, la gran reconciliadora, jamás nos arrepentimos de nuestra ternura, sino de nuestra severidad.

V

El rector

Antes de las doce cayeron varios chaparrones y el agua llenó las cunetas de los senderos de grava que había en el jardín adyacente a la rectoría de Broxton; las grandes rosas de Provenza fueron cruelmente agitadas por el viento y batidas por la lluvia, y las florecillas de delicados tallos quedaron tronchadas y manchadas de barro. Era una mañana melancólica. Había llegado el tiempo de segar el heno, pero no era posible hacerlo pues los prados estaban inundados.

Las personas que tenían una vivienda confortable se entregaron a diversiones caseras en las que no habrían pensado si no fuera por la lluvia. Si la mañana no hubiese sido lluviosa, el señor Irwine no se habría quedado en el comedor jugando al ajedrez con su madre: era lo bastante aficionado a su madre y a jugar al ajedrez como para pasar un buen rato de lluvia con la ayuda de los dos.

Y habrá de permitirme el lector que le introduzca en aquel comedor para presentarle al reverendo Adolphus Irwine, rector de Broxton, vicario de Hayslope y vicario de Blythe; así pues, poseía varios beneficios y ni siquiera el más severo reformador eclesiástico era capaz de ponerlo de malhumor. Entraremos sin hacer ruido y nos quedaremos en la puerta, sin despertar al *setter* de color pardo y de pelo brillante que está tendido ante el hogar con sus dos cachorros al lado; o al perdiguero de negro hocico que dormita como un presidente agobiado por el sueño.

La habitación era espaciosa y de techo elevado y en uno de sus extremos tenía una ventana mirador dividida por una columna. Las paredes, según verá el lector, eran recientes y no estaban pintadas aún. Pero los muebles, aunque de estilo original y costoso, eran viejos y escasos y tampoco en la ventana se descubría ningún cortinaje. El tapete carmesí extendido sobre la mesa estaba ya muy gastado, aunque contrastaba de un modo agradable con el tono apagado del yeso de las paredes; sin embargo, sobre aquel tapete había un servicio de plata maciza con un jarro de agua del mismo dibujo que otros dos, también grandes, que estaban en el aparador y que en sus respectivos centros tenían labrado un escudo de armas. Era evidente que los habitantes de aquella estancia habían heredado más sangre noble que riqueza, y así, no resultaba sorprendente el hecho de que el señor Irwine tuviese una nariz muy bien dibujada y el labio superior distinguido, aunque, en aquel momento sólo podía verse su espalda ancha y recta y el abundante cabello empolvado peinado hacia atrás y atado con una cinta negra, moda conservadora que indicaba sobradamente que ya no era joven. Tal vez se volviese a mirar, y mientras tanto podríamos contemplar a la majestuosa anciana, es decir, a su madre, que era aún hermosa y trigueña, y cuyo cutis lozano resaltaba gracias a la tela blanca y a los encajes que rodeaban su cuello y su cabeza. La buena señora se mantenía erguida como una estatua de Ceres y su rostro moreno, su nariz delicada y aguileña, la boca firme y orgullosa y los ojos negros, pequeños y de intensa mirada, tenían una expresión tan aguda y sarcástica que, involuntariamente, se inclinaba uno a imaginársela con una baraja en la mano disponiéndose a decir la buenaventura. La mano pequeña y morena con que levantaba a la reina estaba adornada con perlas, brillantes y turquesas; y en lo alto de su cabeza se veía cuidadosamente ajustado un gran velo negro, cuyos pliegues creaban un intenso contraste con los de la tela blanca que rodeaba su cuello. Era evidente que la anciana dama había empleado mucho rato en vestirse esa mañana. Pero casi parece obedecer a una ley natural al vestir de aquel modo: subraya su lugar entre las hijas de la realeza que jamás han dudado de su divino origen y que no han encontrado nunca a nadie tan atrevido que llegase a dudarlo.

—Veamos qué te parece, Dauphin —dice la magnífica y anciana dama depositando sobre el tablero la reina y a continuación cruzando los brazos—. Sentiría mucho pronunciar una palabra desagradable.

—¡Ah, madre hechicera, bruja! ¿Cómo podría un cristiano ganarte en el juego? Ojalá hubiera rociado el tablero con agua bendita antes de empezar. Está claro que has hecho trampa; no me convencerás de lo contrario.

—Sí, eso es lo que dicen siempre los vencidos de los grandes conquistadores. Y mira, ahora cae un rayo de sol en el tablero para demostrarte claramente la mala jugada que has hecho al mover ese peón. ¿Quieres que te dé otra oportunidad?

—No, madre. Dejaré que te remuerda la conciencia, ahora está saliendo el sol. Vayamos a pisar un poco el barro, ¿de acuerdo, Juno?

Estas últimas palabras fueron dirigidas al *setter* de color pardo, que se puso en pie al oír su nombre y apoyó el hocico de un modo insinuante sobre la pierna de su amo.

—Pero antes —prosiguió éste— debo ir arriba a ver a Anne. Tuve que salir para asistir al entierro de Tholer cuando me disponía a subir.

—Es inútil, hijo; no podrá hablarte. Kate dice que esta mañana tiene uno de sus peores dolores de cabeza.

—Por muy enferma que esté, siempre agradece que vaya a verla.

Si el lector sabe hasta qué grado la conversación humana no es más que un impulso inútil de la costumbre, no se maravillará cuando yo le diga que ya se había hecho idéntica objeción y que había recibido la misma respuesta centenares de veces en el curso de los quince años que hacía que duraba la enfermedad de Anne, hermana del señor Irwine. Las ancianas damas espléndidas que emplean largo rato en vestirse por la mañana, suelen demostrar muy poca simpatía para con las hijas enfermas.

Mientras el señor Irwine continuaba sentado, con la espalda apoyada en el respaldo de la silla y acariciando la cabeza de Juno, apareció un criado en la puerta y dijo:

—Señor, si no tiene inconveniente y dispone de tiempo, Joshua Rann desea hablar con usted.

—Hazle entrar aquí —contestó la señora Irwine tomando su labor de calceta—. Siempre me agrada oír lo que el señor Rann tiene que decir. Como llevará los zapatos sucios, procura que se los limpie antes, Carrol.

Dos minutos más tarde apareció el señor Rann en la puerta e hizo dos deferentes reverencias que, sin embargo, no bastaron para conquistar el agrado del perdiguero Pug, que profirió un fuerte ladrido y atravesó corriendo la estancia para reconocer las piernas del forastero, en tanto que los dos cachorros, contemplando las gruesas pantorrillas y las medias de estambre desde un punto de vista más voluptuoso, se arrojaron sobre ellas y empezaron a gruñir muy divertidos. Mientras tanto, el señor Irwine se volvió sobre su asiento y dijo:

—¿Qué hay, Joshua? ¿Ocurre algo grave en Hayslope, que le ha hecho venir en una mañana lluviosa como ésta? Siéntese, no se preocupe por los perros. Deles un amistoso puntapié. Aquí, Pug, sinvergüenza.

Resulta muy agradable ver a determinadas personas dar media vuelta sobre su asiento; parece como si, en pleno invierno, se sintiese un soplo cálido o el resplandor del hogar en el frío del anochecer. El señor Irwine era uno de esos hombres. Tenía, como su madre, el mismo parecido que el amado recuerdo del rostro de un amigo guarda con el rostro verdadero de éste. Las facciones eran más generosas, más brillante la sonrisa y más cordial la expresión. Si el perfil no hubiese sido tan fino, su rostro podría haberse calificado de alegre, pero ésta no era la palabra apropiada para aquella mezcla de humor apacible y de distinción.

—Muchas gracias, reverendo —contestó el señor Rann procurando mostrar cierta indiferencia con respecto a sus piernas, aunque sacudiéndolas alternativamente para alejar a los cachorros—. Si no tiene inconveniente, continuaré de pie, porque me resulta más apropiado. Espero que tanto usted como la señora Irwine estén bien y que la señorita Irwine…, quiero decir que la señorita Anne, estará tan bien como de costumbre.

—Sí, Joshua, gracias. Ya ve qué aspecto excelente tiene mi madre. Pero ¿qué ocurre?

—Pues es el caso, señor, que tuve que venir a Broxton a entregar un trabajo y creí conveniente venir a visitarle para informarle de lo ocurrido en el pueblo, pues nunca había visto cosa semejante en mis tiempos, a pesar de que el día de Santo Tomás hará ya sesenta años que vivo allá, y pese a que yo ya estaba encargado de cobrar los derechos de Pascua para el señor Blick antes de que su reverencia viniese a la parroquia, y a pesar de que oí tocar todas las campanas, presencié la apertura de todas las tumbas y canté en el coro mucho antes de que Bartle Massey llegase, de no se sabe dónde, con su modo especial de cantar y sus motetes, en los que se pierden todos menos él, pues cada uno continúa el canto del anterior, como las ovejas balan en el campo una tras otra. Y me consta muy bien cuáles son los deberes del sacristán de la parroquia y también que faltaría al respeto de su reverencia, de la Iglesia y del rey, si guardase silencio acerca de lo que ocurre. Me cogieron de sorpresa y nada sabía por anticipado, de modo que me quedé tan

asombrado y atónito cual si hubiese perdido mis herramientas. La noche pasada apenas pude dormir cuatro horas, pues tuve muchas pesadillas y me desperté más cansado que al acostarme.

—Pero ¿qué ocurre, Joshua? ¿Han vuelto a entrar los ladrones en la iglesia?

—¿Ladrones? No, señor. Y sin embargo puedo decir que realmente son ladrones y también que han robado la iglesia. Lo que ocurre es que los metodistas se apoderarán de la parroquia, si su reverencia y su señoría, el caballero Donnithorne, no creen apropiado decir una palabra y prohibirlo. No crea, señor, que me propongo darle instrucciones, porque aún no me he olvidado tanto de quién soy como para no hablar como es debido a mis superiores. Sin embargo, el caso es que no tengo más remedio que referirle lo que ocurre. Así, he de decirle que una mujer metodista, que habita en casa de maese Poyser, predicó ayer tarde en el parque, y eso es tan verdad como que estoy ahora delante de su reverencia.

—¿Qué predicó en el parque? —exclamó el señor Irwine sorprendido aunque tranquilo—. ¿Aquella muchacha pálida y bonita a quien vi en casa de Poyser? Desde luego resultaba evidente que era metodista, cuáquera o algo por el estilo, a juzgar por su traje; pero ignoraba que fuese predicadora.

—Pues digo la verdad, señor —replicó el señor Rann, comprimiendo su boca en forma semicircular y haciendo una pausa para subrayar sus palabras—. Predicó en el parque ayer tarde y se apoderó de Bess Chad, pues la pobre muchacha ha tenido varios ataques desde entonces.

—Bueno, Bess Cranage es una muchacha muy sana y estoy seguro de que se repondrá, Joshua. ¿Ha tenido ataques alguien más?

—No, señor. Por lo menos, que yo sepa. Pero nadie sabe lo que ocurrirá si continúan estas predicaciones semanales. Estoy seguro de que acabarán con la vida tranquila del pueblo. Porque el caso es que los metodistas hacen creer a la gente que si se bebe un vaso más de cerveza o si gozan de alguna comodidad, irán con toda seguridad al infierno. Yo no soy vicioso ni borracho, y estoy seguro de que nadie podrá acusarme de eso; pero creo que un litro de cerveza en Pascua o en Navidad, aunque exceda lo acostumbrado, es una cosa naturalísima, como cuando vamos cantando y la gente nos invita a beber un trago, o cuando voy a cobrar los derechos y me tomo una pinta de cerveza, fumo una pipa y charlo un rato en casa de maese Casson, porque yo, gracias a Dios, me he educado en la Iglesia y hace ya treinta y dos años que soy sacristán, de manera que sé de sobra lo que es la religión.

—Muy bien. ¿Y qué me aconseja, Joshua? ¿Qué cree que podría hacerse?

—Pues bien, reverendo. Yo no tomaría ninguna medida contra esa joven, porque nada malo resultará de que predique sola y, además, me han dicho que muy pronto volverá a su país. Es sobrina del señor Poyser y no quisiera demostrar ninguna falta de respeto a la familia de Hall Farm, pues desde que soy zapatero los he calzado a todos, grandes y pequeños. Pero en cambio, Will Maskery es un furioso metodista y no dudo de que fue él quien hizo predicar ayer a esa joven y que traerá a otros predicadores de Treddleston si no le paramos los pies. Creo que le podríamos dar a entender que no volverá a construir ni arreglar los carruajes y las cosas de la iglesia y que se quedará solo en su casa, como le ocurre al caballero Donnithorne.

—Muy bien. Pero usted mismo, Joshua, ha dicho que antes nunca había predicado nadie en el parque y, por lo tanto, no le consta que ello tenga que volver a ocurrir. Los metodistas no van a predicar a aldeas como Hayslope, donde sólo hay un puñado de labradores demasiado fatigados para hacerles caso. Eso sería como ir a predicar en las montañas de Binton. En cuanto a Maskery, no es predicador, según creo.

—No, señor. Es incapaz de decir dos palabras seguidas sin ayuda de los libros, y estoy persuadido de que no hablaría mejor que una vaca. Pero en cambio tiene una lengua muy larga para hablar sin respeto de alguno de los vecinos, pues dijo que yo era un fariseo ciego y, además, utiliza la Biblia para encontrar apodos destinados a personas superiores a él en sabiduría y edad; y lo peor es que se ha atrevido a pronunciar palabras desagradables acerca de su reverencia; puedo jurar que le llamó «perro mudo» y «pastor perezoso». Espero que su reverencia me perdonará que repita estas palabras.

—Hace mal, Joshua. Hay que dejar que las malas palabras mueran después de haber sido pronunciadas. En cuanto a Will Maskery, podría ser mucho peor de lo que es. Antes era un bribón borracho que abandonaba el trabajo y pegaba a su mujer, según me dijeron; ahora es laborioso y decente, y lleva una buena vida junto a su esposa. Si puede darme pruebas de que se mete con sus vecinos y es causa de alguna querella o disgusto, entonces creeré que mi deber, como clérigo y como magistrado, me obliga a intervenir. En cambio, no sería conveniente que las personas sensatas, como usted y yo, nos preocupásemos de tonterías y creyésemos que la Iglesia corre peligro porque Will Maskery hable de modo imprudente, o una joven predique en serio a un puñado de personas en el parque. Es preciso vivir y dejar vivir, y no sólo en lo que se refiere a la religión, sino también con respecto a otras cosas. Cumpla con su deber como sacristán y enterrador, como siempre ha hecho, confeccionando el calzado estupendo que hace para sus vecinos, y le aseguro que no ocurrirá en Hayslope nada desagradable.

—Su reverencia es muy bueno; aunque como no vive en la parroquia, el asunto pesa más sobre mis propios hombros.

—No hay duda, pero es preciso tener siempre en cuenta que no hay que rebajar a la Iglesia a los ojos de la gente, dando a entender que nos asustamos por poco, Joshua. Confío en su sentido común y en que no dará importancia a lo que Will Maskery diga de usted o de mí. Usted y sus vecinos pueden seguir bebiendo un vaso de cerveza, aunque con sobriedad, y una vez hayan terminado sus tareas, como buenos feligreses; y si Will Maskery no se reúne con ustedes y, en cambio, asiste a las reuniones religiosas de Treddleston, hay que dejarle en paz; eso no ha de importarnos mientras no nos impida hacer lo que queramos. Y en cuanto a la gente que diga cosas tontas de nosotros, no hay que hacerles caso, de la misma manera que el campanario de la iglesia no da importancia a las cornejas que revolotean en torno a él. Will Maskery va a la iglesia todos los domingos por la tarde, y durante la semana se dedica a su trabajo de construcción y reparación de carros, y así, mientras obre de este modo, hay que dejarle en paz.

—Sí, señor. Pero en cuanto entra en la iglesia y se sienta, empieza a menear la cabeza, a poner mala cara y a demostrar su disgusto, de tal manera que me dan ganas de ir a su encuentro y romperle la cara de un puñetazo. Dios me perdone y su reverencia también, por hablar de este modo en su presencia. Además, dijo que nuestros cánticos de Navidad parecían una olla de grillos.

—Todo eso obedece a que tiene muy mal oído, Joshua. Ya sabe que cuando la gente tiene un tarugo por cabeza es imposible remediarlo. Con seguridad no logrará que los habitantes de Hayslope participen de su opinión, mientras siga cantando como lo hace.

—Sí, señor. Pero a uno se le revuelve el estómago cada vez que oye hablar así de las Escrituras. Conozco tan bien como él las palabras de la Biblia y sería capaz de recitar los Salmos en sueños, si me pellizcaran. Pero comprendo que no hay que pronunciar en vano sus palabras. Lo mismo sería llevarse a casa el cáliz y utilizarlo para beber en las comidas.

—Ésta es una buena observación, Joshua. Pero como decía antes…

Mientras hablaba el señor Irwine, se oyó un ruido de pasos y el sonido de una espuela que resonaba contra el pavimento de piedra de la entrada, y Joshua Rann se hizo a un lado en la puerta para dejar paso. Se oyó una vigorosa voz de tenor:

—¿Puede entrar el ahijado Arthur?

—Adelante, ahijado —contestó la señora Irwine con el tono de voz profundo y casi masculino característico de la vigorosa anciana.

En el acto entró en la estancia un joven caballero que vestía traje de equitación y llevaba en cabestrillo el brazo derecho; inmediatamente se produjo una agradable confusión de risas, interjecciones y apretones de mano, así como algunas palabras de saludo mezcladas con los alegres y breves ladridos y con los meneos de los rabos por parte de los miembros caninos de la familia, confusión que da a entender la buena acogida dispensada al recién llegado. El joven caballero era Arthur Donnithorne, conocido en Hayslope con varios nombres, como, por ejemplo, «el joven caballero», «el heredero» y «el capitán». Solamente disfrutaba de ese grado en la milicia de Loamshire; mas para los terratenientes de Hayslope era el más capitán de todos los jóvenes caballeros del mismo grado en el ejército regular de su majestad y los eclipsaba con su resplandor, del mismo modo que el planeta Júpiter destaca entre todos los planetas de la Vía Láctea. Y si el lector desea saber cuál era su aspecto, procure recordar a un joven inglés de patillas de color pardo, cabello de igual tono, rizado, y cutis claro, a quien pueda haber encontrado en alguna ciudad extranjera, enorgulleciéndose de ser su compatriota. Iba limpio, estaba bien criado, tenía las manos blancas y, al parecer, se bastaba para vencer y derribar a un enemigo utilizando la mano izquierda. No mereceré ser llamado sastre por la molestia que dé al lector describiendo su traje, y así sólo diré que llevaba un chaleco a rayas, un levitón de largos faldones y botas bajas.

El capitán Donnithorne se volvió para tomar una silla y dijo:

—No quiero interrumpir a Joshua, pues sin duda tiene algo que decir.

—Pido humildemente mil perdones a su señoría —dijo Joshua haciendo una profunda reverencia—, pero hay una cosa que quiero decir a su reverencia, aunque las demás se me han ido ya de la cabeza.

—Pues dígala pronto, Joshua —contestó el señor Irwine.

—Supongo, señor, que no se habrá enterado de que ha muerto Mathias Bede. Se ha ahogado esta mañana, o, más probablemente, ayer noche, en el arroyo del Sauce, junto al puente y delante de su propia casa.

—¡Oh! —exclamaron a la vez los dos caballeros, como si les interesase mucho aquel suceso.

—Y Seth Bede ha venido a verme esta mañana para informarme de que desea decir a su reverencia, según su hermano Adam ya os rogó, que les concediera usted el favor de que la tumba de su padre sea

excavada en White Thorn, porque su madre así lo desea a causa de un sueño que tuvo; ellos habrían venido a solicitarlo en persona, pero no pudieron hacerlo por estar ocupados con el coroner y todo lo demás; y su madre desea obtener cuanto antes su permiso, por miedo de que alguien se le anticipe. Si su reverencia no tiene inconveniente, les mandaré a mi hijo tan pronto como llegue a casa. Por eso me he atrevido a molestarle con tal petición en presencia de su señoría.

—Habrá que complacerles, Joshua. Yo mismo iré a ver a Adam. Sin embargo, mándeles a su hijo para decirles que pueden disponer de la tumba, a no ser que algo me lo impida. Y ahora, buenos días, Joshua. Vaya a la cocina y tome un vaso de cerveza.

—¡Pobre viejo Mathias! —dijo el señor Irwine en cuanto Joshua se hubo marchado—. Temo que la bebida ayudó al arroyo para acabarlo de ahogar. Ojalá hubiese desaparecido de forma menos penosa la carga de los hombros de mi amigo Adam. Ese muchacho excelente ha estado manteniendo a su padre y evitándole la ruina durante los cinco o seis últimos años.

—Es un buen sujeto, ese Adam —dijo el capitán Donnithorne—. Cuando yo era pequeño y Adam tenía quince años y me enseñó carpintería, yo solía decirme que si alguna vez llegaba a ser un rico sultán nombraría gran visir a Adam. Y ahora creo que después de ser elevado a tan alto rango se comportaría igual que cualquier hombre pobre y sabio de la historia oriental. Y si vivo lo bastante para ser un gran propietario, en vez de un pobre diablo que goza de una mísera pensión, haré de Adam mi mano derecha. Cuidará de mis bosques, pues parece saber de esas cosas mucho mejor que todos los hombres que he conocido y me consta que sacaría de ellos el doble de lo que obtiene mi abuelo por culpa de la dirección de ese miserable viejo Satchell, que no sabe una palabra acerca de la madera. Varias veces he hablado de este asunto con mi abuelo pero, por alguna razón, siente antipatía por Adam y yo no puedo hacer nada al respecto. Pero vamos a ver, reverendo, ¿quiere salir un poco a caballo conmigo? Hace un tiempo espléndido. Si quiere, podríamos ir juntos a visitar a Adam; pero quisiera también detenerme en Hall Farm para ver los cachorros que me reserva Poyser.

—Vale más que te quedes y almuerces, Arthur —dijo la señora Irwine—. Son casi las dos. Carrol te servirá en el acto.

—Yo también quisiera ir a Hall Farm —dijo el señor Irwine—, a fin de ver otra vez a la pequeña metodista que vive allí. Joshua me ha dicho que ayer tarde estuvo predicando en el parque.

—¡Por Júpiter! —exclamó el capitán Donnithorne echándose a reír—. ¡Pero si parece ser una muchacha de lo más tranquila! Sin embargo, hay en ella algo que llama la atención. Realmente me intimidó cuando la vi por primera vez: estaba sentada e inclinada sobre su labor, al sol, en la parte exterior de la casa, cuando yo llegué a caballo y pregunté sin darme cuenta de que era forastera: «¿Está Martín Poyser en casa?». Y declaro que en cuanto ella se levantó, me miró y me contestó «Está en casa, creo. Voy a llamarle», me avergoncé de haberle dirigido la palabra con tanta rudeza. Parecía santa Catalina vestida con un traje de cuáquera. Tiene un rostro que pocas veces se ve entre la gente de por aquí.

—Me gustaría ver a esa joven, Dauphin —dijo la señora Irwine—. Haz que venga aquí con un pretexto cualquiera.

—No sé cómo podré arreglarlo, madre. No será muy apropiado que yo proteja a una predicadora metodista, en caso de que ella consienta en ser protegida por un pastor perezoso, según me llama Will Maskery. Deberías haber venido un poco antes, Arthur, para oír cómo Joshua denunciaba a su vecino Will Maskery. El viejo quiere que excomulgue al carretero y lo entregue al poder civil, es decir, a tu abuelo, para que sea despojado de su casa y de su taller. Si yo me prestase a intervenir ahora en este asunto, daría origen a una historia de odio y de persecución que a los metodistas les gustaría publicar en el próximo número de su revista. Poco me costaría persuadir a Chad Cranage y a otra media docena más de cabezas duras de que prestarían un buen servicio a la Iglesia arrojando a palos del pueblo a Will Maskery, y luego, después de regalarles medio soberano para emborracharse gloriosamente una vez hubiesen realizado la hazaña, habría cometido la misma torpeza que mis compañeros en sacerdocio han llevado a cabo en sus parroquias respectivas durante los últimos treinta años.

—Sin embargo, ese individuo ha estado insolente al llamarte «pastor perezoso» y «perro mudo» —dijo la señora Irwine—. Por otra parte, creo que deberías pararle los pies. Eres demasiado bueno, Dauphin.

—¡Cómo, madre! ¿Crees que sería un modo apropiado de defender mi dignidad querer desmentir las palabras de Will Maskery? Por otra parte, no estoy seguro de que no tenga razón. Soy un poco perezoso y me cuesta mucho montar a caballo; eso sin mencionar que siempre gasto más de lo que puedo en ladrillos y cemento y, en cambio, me enfado si un mendigo lisiado me pide seis peniques. Esos desgraciados que creen poder contribuir a la regeneración de la humanidad saliendo a predicar al despuntar el día y antes de empezar la jornada de trabajo, pueden tener, si gustan, una pobre opinión de mí. Pero, en fin, vamos a

almorzar. ¿Bajará Kate?

—La señorita Irwine dijo a Bridge que hoy almorzaría en su cuarto —replicó Carrol—. No puede abandonar a la señorita Anne.

—Muy bien. Di a Bridge que comunique a la señorita Anne que iré a verla enseguida—. Veo que ya puedes mover muy bien el brazo derecho, Arthur —continuó diciendo el señor Irwine, al observar que el capitán Donnithorne sacaba el brazo del cabestrillo.

—Sí. Muy bien, pero Godwin insiste en que lo lleve así durante algún tiempo. Espero poder volver al regimiento a principios de agosto. Es muy aburrido verse encerrado en el cazadero durante los meses de verano, cuando no se puede cazar nada, y no estar bastante cansado al anochecer para dormirse apaciblemente. Sin embargo, haremos estremecer a las piedras el 30 de julio. Por una vez mi abuelo me ha dado *carte blanche*, y os prometo que la diversión valdrá la pena. El mundo no verá dos veces la gran ocasión de que yo llegue a la mayoría de edad. Me dispongo a prepararle un elevado trono, madrina, o, mejor dicho, dos: uno en el prado y otro en la sala de baile, a fin de que pueda sentarse y contemplarnos como si fuese una verdadera diosa del Olimpo.

—Pues yo me pondré mi mejor traje de brocado, el mismo que llevé hace veinte años, el día de tu bautizo —dijo la señora Irwine—. ¡Ah! Y creo que veré a tu pobre madre flotando por allí, con su traje blanco, que aquel mismo día me pareció una mortaja, y, en efecto, fue su mortaja tres meses más tarde. Con ella enterraron tu gorrito y tu ropa de bautizo. La pobrecilla se empeñó en ello. Gracias a Dios te pareces a la familia de tu padre, Arthur; si hubieses sido un niño amarillento, flaco y pequeño, yo no me habría prestado a ser tu madrina, pues, sin duda alguna, al crecer te hubieses parecido a los Donnithorne. En cambio tenías entonces un semblante tan regordete y un pecho tan desarrollado y gritabas con tanta fuerza, que no tuve la menor duda de que llegarías a ser un verdadero Tradgett.

—Tal vez se expuso, madre, a obrar con cierta precipitación —dijo sonriendo el señor Irwine—. ¿No se acuerda de lo que ocurrió con los cachorros de Juno? Uno de ellos era la misma imagen de su madre, aunque de todos modos tenía tres o cuatro cosas de su padre. La naturaleza es lo bastante inteligente incluso para engañarla a usted misma, madre.

—Tonterías, hijo. Jamás he visto convertirse en hurón al que tenga el tipo de mastín. Nunca podrás persuadirme de que soy incapaz de adivinar por su aspecto exterior los sentimientos de un hombre. Si un individuo no me gusta, puedes tener la seguridad de que nunca llegará a agradarme. No quiero conocer ni tratar a las personas feas y desagradables, del mismo modo como me niego a probar los platos que no me gustan a primera vista. Y si al verlos me estremezco, pueden marcharse. Unos ojos feos, de cerdo o de pez, me ponen verdaderamente enferma, como un olor desagradable.

—Ya que hablamos de ojos —observó el capitán Donnithorne—, eso me recuerda que quería traerle un libro, madrina. Llegó el otro día, en un paquete, de Londres. Me consta que le gustan las historias raras y extraordinarias. Es un volumen de poemas: *Baladas líricas*.

Muchas de ellas parecen tonterías; pero la primera es de un estilo muy distinto. Se titula «El viejo marinero»[3]. Si es una historia, he de confesar que no la comprendo, pero desde luego es algo raro, que impresiona. Se lo mandaré y también algunos otros libros que le gustará ver, Irwine. Son unos folletos acerca del antinomianismo y el evangelismo, o lo que sean. No sé por qué ese tipo me habrá mandado tales cosas. Le he escrito diciéndole que en adelante no me mande ningún libro ni folleto ni nada cuyo titulo termine en «ismo».

—A mí tampoco me gustan mucho, pero, de todos modos, examinaré esos folletos, pues siempre sirven para enterarse de lo que ocurre. Y ahora tengo algo que hacer, Arthur —continuó diciendo el señor Irwine, poniéndose en pie para salir de la estancia—. Luego estaré preparado para salir contigo.

El asunto en que tenía que ocuparse el señor Irwine le obligó a subir la vieja escalera de piedra (pues una parte de la casa era muy antigua) a detenerse ante una puerta, a la que llamó con suavidad. Una voz femenina le dio permiso para entrar y penetró en una estancia tan oscurecida por las cortinas y los visillos que la señorita Kate, la flaca señora de cierta edad que estaba de pie junto a la cama, no habría tenido luz suficiente para otra clase de trabajo que la labor de calceta que había dejado en una mesa cercana; pero en aquel momento se ocupaba en algo para lo que no hacía falta luz, pues humedecía con vinagre la dolorida cabeza que reposaba en la almohada. Era el de la enferma un rostro muy pequeño; quizás en algún tiempo fue hermoso, pero ahora estaba flaco y desencajado. La señorita Kate se acercó al hermano de la enferma y murmuró:

—No le dirijáis la palabra, pues hoy no puede sufrir que se le hable.

Anne mantenía los ojos cerrados y contraídas las cejas, como si sufriese un dolor intenso. El señor Irwine se acercó a la cama y tomó una de las delicadas manos de la enferma y la besó; una ligera presión de los

pequeños dedos de ésta le indicó cuánto le agradecía que hubiese subido la escalera para hacer aquella caricia. Él permaneció un momento mirándola y luego salió de la estancia andando con pasos quedos. Se había quitado las botas y puesto unas zapatillas antes de subir. Y quien recordase las muchas cosas que había renunciado a hacer, incluso por sí mismo, antes de molestarse en ponerse o en quitarse las botas, no creerá que éste sea un detalle insignificante.

Las hermanas del señor Irwine, según hubiera podido atestiguar cualquiera de las personas que habitaban en un radio de quince kilómetros de Broxton, no tenían nada de interesantes. Era una lástima que la hermosa e inteligente señora Irwine hubiese tenido unas hijas tan mediocres. Valía la pena recorrer quince kilómetros, en cualquier ocasión, por el gusto de contemplar a aquella refinada y anciana dama. Su belleza, sus facultades bien conservadas y su dignidad, propia de otros tiempos, la convertían en un agradable objeto de conversación, junto a la salud del rey, los nuevos modelos de trajes de algodón, las noticias de Egipto y el pleito de lord Dacey, que atormentaba a la pobre lady Dacey. Pero nadie se acordaba de mencionar siquiera a las señoritas Irwine, excepto los pobres del pueblo de Broxton, que las consideraban muy instruidas en la ciencia médica y hablaban de ellas de un modo vago, llamándolas «las señoritas». Si alguien hubiese preguntado al viejo Jacob Dummilov quién le dio su chaqueta de franela, habría contestado: «Las señoritas, el invierno pasado». Y en cuanto a la viuda Steene, confiaba mucho en las virtudes de la «medicina» que las señoritas le dieron para la tos. Este mismo nombre servía también, y con gran éxito, para domar a los niños traviesos, de modo que al ver el pálido rostro de la señorita Anne, varios arrapiezos de la piel de Barrabás quedaron convencidos de que estaba enterada de todos sus crímenes y de que conocía el número exacto de piedras que habían arrojado contra los patos del granjero Britton. Mas para quienes las conocían desde un punto de vista menos mítico, las señoritas Irwine eran personas cuya existencia resultaba superflua, figuras nada artísticas que ocupaban un lugar en el tejido de la vida, aunque sin ningún efecto. Si las cefalalgias crónicas de la señorita Anne hubiesen podido atribuirse a una patética historia de desengaño amoroso, la joven habría tenido cierto interés romántico, pero como jamás se conoció ni se inventó semejante historia con respecto a ella, la impresión general era que ambas hermanas continuaban solteronas por la razón prosaica de no haber recibido jamás una proposición de matrimonio aceptable. Sin embargo, paradójicamente, la existencia de las personas insignificantes tiene en el mundo consecuencias de mucha importancia. Eso puede demostrarse por el hecho de que influyen en el precio del pan y en el de los salarios, despiertan el malhumor de los egoístas, dan ocasión a actos de heroísmo por parte de las personas bondadosas y de otros muchos modos representan papeles de bastante interés en la tragedia de la vida. Y si el guapo y generoso clérigo, el reverendo Adolphus Irwine, no hubiese tenido aquellas dos hermanas, solteronas sin remedio, su suerte habría sido muy distinta. Es muy posible que en su juventud se hubiese casado con una esposa agradable, y ahora, cuando ya empezaba a encanecer su cabello bajo los polvos que lo cubrían, tendría hijos de alta estatura y hermosas y lozanas hijas; en una palabra, todas aquellas posesiones que los hombres consideran una justa compensación de los trabajos que realizan bajo el sol. Pero tal como estaban las cosas —y en vista de que sus tres beneficios solamente le daban setecientas libras esterlinas al año, y de que no habría sido posible sostener a su espléndida madre y a su hermana enferma, sin contar a la otra hermana, de la que se hablaba sin anteponer a su nombre ningún adjetivo—, puesto que era imposible, repetimos, sostenerlas en la vida cómoda y digna de unas verdaderas señoras, según les correspondía por su nacimiento y por sus costumbres, y, al mismo tiempo, mantener una familia propia, a la edad de cuarenta y ocho años continuaba soltero, sin creer que fuese ningún mérito aquella renuncia, de la que hablaba risueño cuando alguien aludía a ella y la ofrecía como excusa de muchas pequeñas debilidades que una esposa no habría consentido jamás. Y quizás fuese la única persona del mundo que no creyera que sus hermanas carecían de interés y además eran superfluas; porque poseía un gran corazón, un carácter cariñoso y afable, y jamás abrigaba ningún pensamiento gruñón ni mezquino. Era epicúreo, si se quiere, y carecía de entusiasmo por sus deberes; sin embargo, y como ya habrá visto el lector, poseía una fibra moral sutil y suficiente para sentir una incansable ternura por el sufrimiento oscuro y monótono. Precisamente su generosa indulgencia le hacía ignorar la rudeza de su madre con respecto a sus hermanas, que contrastaba enormemente con el cariño que le demostraba a él, quien, por su parte, no fruncía el ceño ante las faltas irremediables.

Obsérvese la diferencia entre la impresión que un hombre causa en nosotros cuando vamos a su lado, hablando familiarmente, o cuando le vemos en su casa, y el aspecto que adquiere al contemplarle desde un nivel elevado e histórico; e incluso según le juzga un vecino crítico que le considera un sistema personalizado o una opinión, en vez de un hombre. El señor Roe, «el predicador viajero» metodista establecido en Treddleston, había incluido al señor Irwine en una afirmación general referente a la clerecía eclesiástica del distrito, que describía a los párrocos como hombres entregados a los apetitos de la carne y al

orgullo, que cazaban y se ocupaban del adorno de sus casas, preocupándose de qué debemos comer y beber y con qué nos vestimos, sin cuidarse de dispensar el pan de la vida a sus rebaños, predicando, en el mejor de los casos, una moralidad carnal encaminada a adormecer el alma, y traficando con las almas de los hombres al recibir dinero a cambio de desempeñar el oficio pastoral en algunas parroquias por las que no se dejaban ver más que una vez al año. El historiador eclesiástico, al examinar las comunicaciones parlamentarias de aquel periodo, encuentra honorables y celosos miembros de la Iglesia desprovistos de toda simpatía por la tribu de los gazmoños metodistas que hacen afirmaciones raramente menos desagradables que las del señor Roe. Y es imposible para mí decir que el señor Irwine no mereciese en absoluto la clasificación genérica que se le había asignado. En realidad no tenía propósitos elevados ni ningún entusiasmo teológico. Si se me sometiera a un minucioso interrogatorio, me vería obligado a confesar que no sentía grandes desasosiegos por las almas de sus feligreses y que habría considerado que era perder el tiempo hablar de un modo doctrinal a fin de despertar los buenos sentimientos del tío Taft o de Chad Cranage, el herrero. De haber tenido la costumbre de hablar teóricamente, quizás hubiese dicho que la única forma conveniente que la religión podía tener en tales mentes era la de ciertas emociones imprecisas aunque fuertes, que se confundieran entre sí como influencia santificadora sobre los sentimientos familiares y los deberes para con los vecinos. Consideraba más importante la costumbre del bautismo que su doctrina, y que los beneficios religiosos que el campesino obtenía de la iglesia a que pertenecían sus padres y del sagrado trozo de tierra en que yacían enterrados, dependían muy ligeramente de la clara comprensión de la liturgia o del sermón. En una palabra, el rector no era lo que hoy se llamaría un hombre celoso en el cumplimiento de sus deberes. Le gustaba más la historia de la iglesia que la divinidad, y tenía mayor discernimiento de los caracteres de los hombres que interés en sus opiniones. No era laborioso, abnegado, ni demasiado caritativo; como se comprende, su teología era floja, su paladar mental era más bien pagano y encontraba más sabor en una cita de Sófocles o de Teócrito que en cualquier texto de Isaías o de Amos. Pero si se da de comer carne cruda al perro cazador, ¿por qué hemos de extrañarnos de que le guste luego la perdiz cruda durante toda su vida? Y los recuerdos del señor Irwine de su entusiasmo y ambiciones juveniles estaban asociados con la poesía y la ética, que nada tenían que ver con la Biblia.

Por otra parte, debo hacer constar, pues tengo cierta parcialidad cariñosa hacia la memoria del rector, que no era vengativo, según han sido algunos filántropos; que no era intolerante, en tanto que corre el rumor de que algunos celosos teólogos no se han visto libres de esa mancha; y si bien habría declinado, con toda probabilidad, el entregar su cuerpo para que lo quemasen en honor de cualquier causa pública, y a pesar de que estaba muy lejos de donar todos sus bienes para alimentar a los pobres, tenía, sin embargo, esa caridad que algunas veces le falta a la virtud más ilustre: la de otorgar toda su ternura a las debilidades del prójimo y nunca sentirse inclinado a atribuirlas a la maldad. Era uno de aquellos hombres, poco frecuentes, sin duda, de quienes tan sólo podemos llegar a conocer sus mejores cualidades siguiéndolos cuando se alejan de la plaza, del mercado, de la plataforma y del púlpito, y entrando con ellos en sus propias casas, oyendo la voz con que hablan a los pequeños y a los viejos, y presenciando el cuidado que ponen por las necesidades diarias de sus compañeros, que aceptan sus bondades como algo normal y corriente y no sujeto al panegírico.

Tales hombres vivieron felizmente en tiempos que florecieron los grandes abusos, y algunas veces fueron los representantes vivos de esos mismos abusos. Hay una idea que puede consolarnos un poco si la vemos por el otro lado: la de que a veces es mejor no seguir a los grandes reformadores de abusos más allá del umbral de su propia casa.

Pero cualquiera que sea la idea que se tenga ahora del señor Irwine, si el lector lo hubiese visto aquella tarde de junio cabalgando en su jaca gris y con los perros corriendo a su alrededor, digno, erguido, viril, con una bondadosa sonrisa en sus labios bien dibujados, mientras hablaba a su atrevido compañero montado en la yegua baya, seguramente se habría dicho que por mal que armonizara con las sólidas reglas de la dignidad clerical, armonizaba muy bien con aquel apacible paisaje.

Veámosle a la luz brillante del sol, interrumpida de vez en cuando por las masas de nubes que circulaban por el cielo, y mientras subía la montaña por la pendiente de Broxton, donde los altos aleros y los olmos de la rectoría parecían dominar la pequeña iglesia encalada. Pronto se hallarían en la parroquia de Hayslope; en efecto, la torre gris de la iglesia y los tejados del pueblo se hallaban ante ellos, hacia la izquierda, y más allá, a la derecha, podían divisar ya las chimeneas de Hall Farm.

VI

Hall Farm

Evidentemente aquella puerta no se abría nunca, porque la alta hierba y las píceas crecían muy cerca de ella y, de ser abierta, como estaba muy oxidada, la fuerza necesaria para hacer girar sus goznes habría bastado sin duda para derribar los pilares de piedras cuadradas, con gran detrimento de los dos leones de piedra que sonreían con dudosa afabilidad carnívora sobre un escudo de armas que coronaba cada uno de los pilares. Gracias a las muescas y a las mellas de los pilares, resultaría muy fácil encaramarse hasta lo alto de la cerca de ladrillos provista de una albardilla de piedra; pero sólo con acercarse a los oxidados barrotes de la puerta podía verse bastante bien la casa, a excepción de los rincones del jardín cubiertos de hierba que las tapias encerraban.

Era una posesión antigua y muy hermosa, de ladrillo rojo suavizado por un liquen de color pálido que se había dispersado con feliz irregularidad para relacionar, en términos de amistoso compañerismo, los rojos ladrillos con los adornos de piedra caliza que rodeaban los tres aleros, las ventanas y la puerta. Pero las ventanas estaban cubiertas con postigos de madera y la puerta de la casa, según creo, se parecía a la exterior: nunca se abría. ¡Cómo gemiría y rascaría el suelo de piedra si se abriese! Porque era una puerta sólida, pesada y hermosa, que, en otros tiempos, debía de tener la costumbre de cerrarse con sonoro portazo detrás de un lacayo de librea que acababa de despedir a su señor y a su señora al salir en el coche arrastrado por dos caballos; pero en la actualidad cualquiera hubiera deducido que la casa se hallaba en la primera fase de un pleito y que los frutos de la doble fila de nogales que había a mano derecha del cercado caerían y se pudrirían entre la hierba; sin embargo el ladrido de los perros, que resonaba en las grandes construcciones de la parte superior, convencía de lo contrario. En ese momento salieron unos terneros a medio destetar de un cobertizo de aulagas que había a la izquierda y dieron una estúpida respuesta a aquellos terribles ladridos, quizás imaginándose que se referían a unos cubos de leche.

Sí, la casa debía de estar habitada, y pronto veremos por quién; porque la imaginación tiene licencia para penetrar en todas partes; no teme a los perros y puede subirse por las paredes y, con impunidad, asomarse a las ventanas. Ponga el lector los ojos junto a uno de los cristales de la ventana de la derecha. ¿Qué verá? Una enorme chimenea, con oxidados morillos, y un pavimento de madera desnudo por completo. En el extremo más lejano, una gran pila de vellones de lana, y en el centro de la estancia, algunos sacos de trigo vacíos. Este es el mobiliario del comedor. ¿Y qué se ve desde la ventana de la izquierda? Varias mantas de caballos, una grupera, un torno de hilar y una caja vieja, abierta por completo y llena de trapos de varios colores. En el extremo de esa caja puede apreciarse una gran muñeca de madera que, por lo que se refiere a las mutilaciones sufridas, tenía gran parecido con las mejores esculturas griegas, especialmente por la pérdida total de la nariz. A poca distancia hay una sillita y el mango de un largo látigo infantil.

La historia de aquella casa era bastante clara. En otro tiempo fue la residencia de un caballero rural, cuya familia se vio mermada a causa de la soltería continuada y fue absorbida en el nombre más territorial de Donnithorne. En otro tiempo fue el Hall y ahora se había convertido en Hall Farm. Como algunas ciudades de la costa, que en otro tiempo fueron balnearios y hoy se han convertido en puertos, y donde las calles apartadas permanecen silenciosas y cubiertas de hierba y en cambio los muelles y almacenes son ruidosos y están llenos de actividad, la vida del Hall había cambiado su foco y ya no radiaba desde la sala, sino desde la cocina y la era.

Mucha vida había allí, aunque aquél era el tiempo más soñoliento del año, es decir, el que antecede a la

siega del heno; y también era la hora más soñolienta del día, esto es, las tres de la tarde, aunque el magnífico reloj de ocho días de cuerda de la señora Poyser señalaba las tres y media. Pero siempre hay cierta expresión de vida cuando el sol vuelve a brillar después de la lluvia, y ahora derramaba sus rayos y producía centelleos entre la paja mojada, alumbrando toda la faja de musgo verde sobre las tejas del cobertizo para las vacas e incluso convirtiendo el agua fangosa que corría por el canalillo en magnífico espejo para los patos de amarillos picos que aprovechaban la oportunidad de ir a beber reunidos en pelotón. Había un completo concierto de ruidos; el gran *bull-dog*, encadenado junto a los establos, fue presa de furiosa exasperación a causa de la imprudente conducta de un gallo que se acercó demasiado a la entrada de su perrera, y emitió un horrible ladrido, al que contestaron dos mastines encerrados en el establo de vacas que había enfrente; las viejas gallinas, que iban de un lado a otro con sus polluelos por entre la paja, profirieron un afable cacareo cuando el asustado gallo fue a reunirse con ellas; una marrana con su lechón, ambos con las patas llenas de barro y con los rabos enroscados, emitieron a su vez algunas notas agudas; nuestros amigos los terneros balaban desde la heredad y, dominándolo todo, un oído fino habría podido percibir el rumor continuo de las voces humanas.

Las grandes puertas del granero fueron abiertas de par en par y dentro aparecieron algunos hombres muy ocupados remendando los arneses bajo la dirección del señor Goby, el talabartero, que les refería entonces los últimos chismes de Treddleston. Sin duda Alick, el pastor, había elegido un mal día para que se realizase aquel trabajo pues había llovido demasiado por la mañana. La señora Poyser se quejó con vigor del barro que llevarían al interior de la casa a la hora de comer todos aquellos trabajadores. Y no había recobrado aún su ecuanimidad acerca del asunto, a pesar de haber trascurrido ya tres horas desde la comida y de que el suelo de la casa volvía a estar tan limpio como cualquier otra cosa de aquella maravillosa vivienda. En efecto, para hallar en la casa unas motas de polvo había que encaramarse sobre el cofre de la sal y pasar el dedo sobre la alta tapa de la chimenea, donde las brillantes palmatorias de bronce gozaban de su descanso estival, porque en este tiempo del año, como se comprenderá, todo el mundo se acuesta antes de ponerse el sol o, por lo menos, cuando todavía hay bastante luz para distinguir el perfil de los objetos después de haberse golpeado las canillas contra ellos. Es seguro que en ninguna otra parte podría existir una caja de roble para el reloj y una mesa de la misma madera que hubiesen gozado de igual pulimento manual; verdadero barniz de «muñeca», según lo llamaba la señora Poyser, quien daba gracias a Dios de que jamás hubiese entrado en su casa un barniz ni otra porquería por el estilo. Hetty Sorrel aprovechaba que su tía volvía la espalda para contemplar su agradable rostro en aquellas pulimentadas superficies, porque la mesa de roble estaba usualmente levantada, como sí fuese un biombo, y servía más de adorno que como el objeto a que estaba destinada. Y muchas veces podía mirarse también en los grandes y redondos platos de peltre, alineados en el vasar frente a la larga mesa del comedor, o en las repisas interiores del hogar, que siempre brillaban como si fuesen de jaspe.

Todo estaba reluciente en aquel momento, pues el sol brillaba sobre los platos de peltre y desde sus superficies pulimentadas surgían rayos de luz reflejada que iban a parar a los objetos de roble y de brillante cobre. Y aun iban a parar sobre un objeto más agradable que éstos, puesto que algunos de los rayos iluminaban la mejilla suave de Dinah y doraban su cabello rojizo pálido, mientras ella tenía la cabeza inclinada sobre la gruesa tela de hilo que remendaba para su tía. Habría sido una escena en extremo pacífica si la señora Poyser, que planchaba algunas prendas de la colada del lunes, no hiciera ruido con su plancha ni fuera de un lado a otro cuando quería enfriarla; dirigía la aguda mirada de sus ojos grises azulados desde la cocina a la lechería, donde Hetty batía la manteca, y desde la lechería al otro lado de la cocina, para vigilar a Nancy, que sacaba los pasteles del horno. No se crea, sin embargo, que la señora Poyser poseía un aspecto muy astuto o solemne. Era una mujer bien parecida, que no tendría más allá de treinta y ocho años, de cutis sonrosado y cabello de color de arena, bien conformada y de andar ligero. El objeto más notable de su vestimenta era un amplio delantal de hilo a cuadros que casi le cubría toda la falda, y nada habría podido parecer más sencillo o menos llamativo que su gorro y su traje, porque no había debilidad en la vanidad femenina que ella tolerase y tampoco permitía que se prefiriese el adorno a la utilidad. La señora Poyser y su sobrina Dinah, con su parecido familiar y el contraste que había entre la agudeza de la una y la seráfica suavidad de expresión de la otra, podían haber servido a un pintor de excelentes modelos para Marta y María. Sus ojos tenían el mismo color, pero ofrecía una notable prueba de la diferencia que había entre ellos la conducta de Trip, el *terrier* negro y pardo, cuando éste, sospechoso de varios delitos de poca cuantía, se exponía, con la mayor imprudencia, a las irritadas miradas de la señora Poyser. La lengua de ésta no era menos aguda que sus ojos, y siempre que alguien se ponía al alcance de su voz, reanudaba un sermón no acabado, del mismo modo que un organillo continúa una melodía precisamente en el punto en que la interrumpió.

El hecho de que aquél fuese el día dedicado al remiendo era otra razón que hacía inconveniente la presencia de los talabarteros, y de que, por consiguiente, la señora Poyser regañase a la criada Molly con desacostumbrada severidad. Al parecer ésta había realizado de un modo ejemplar todo el trabajo que le correspondía después de comer, ella misma se limpió y adecentó con rapidez y luego fue a preguntar, humildemente, si podía sentarse en su compañía hasta la hora de ordeñar. Pero esta conducta intachable envolvía, según la señora Poyser, la satisfacción secreta de unos deseos impropios, que se apresuró a proclamar y a descubrir a Molly con incisiva elocuencia.

—A hilar, ¿eh? No es hilar lo que quieres, estoy segura, sino otra cosa muy distinta. Nunca he visto una desvergüenza semejante. Nadie creería que una chica de tu edad quiera ir a sentarse en compañía de seis hombres. De estar en tu lugar me habría avergonzado de pedirlo. En cambio tú no, a pesar de que estás en la casa desde el día de San Miguel, que te contraté en las calles de Treddleston, careciendo de condiciones como careces; que tendrías que estarme agradecida por haberte contratado a trabajar en una casa respetable, y que no sabías hacer nada antes de venir aquí… Piensa que antes no tenías en el mundo más que tus manos. ¿Quién te ha enseñado a limpiar el pavimento? Me gustaría saberlo. De no ser por mí aún dejarías montones de polvo en los rincones y nadie creería que te has educado entre cristianos. Y en cuanto a hilar, has estropeado más de lo que ganas, con el lino que echaste a perder mientras te enseñaba. Además, debes tener en cuenta que no te permitiré ir de un lado a otro, como una tonta, y con la misma imprudencia que si no vieses a nadie. Lo que quieres es cardar la lana para los talabarteros. Eso te gustaría, ¿verdad? Todas hacéis lo mismo y ése es el camino que seguís hasta que alcanzáis vuestra ruina. No estarás contenta hasta que te hayas echado un novio tan tonto como tú. Y ya verás qué risa cuando os hayáis casado y no tengáis por muebles más que un taburete de tres patas y una sola manta con que taparos. Y por toda comida un pedazo de torta para tres mocosos que se la disputarán hambrientos.

—Yo no quería ir con esos hombres —replicó Molly llorosa y anonadada por aquella visión dantesca de su futuro—. Siempre cardamos la lana para el señor Ottley, y esto es lo que le he pedido. Por lo demás, no quiero mirar de nuevo a los talabarteros. ¡Así me muera si deseaba tal cosa!

—¡El señor Ottley! Bonita cosa hiciste en su casa. Allí tal vez a tu señora le gustase que los talabarteros ensuciasen la casa, a juzgar por lo que sé. Por mi parte, nunca he tenido a una chica que sepa lo que es limpiar. Eso me hace creer que todo el mundo vive como si fueran cerdos. Y en cuanto a esa Betty que estaba empleada en la lechería de Trent, antes de venir a mi casa dejó los quesos sin limpiar, de una semana a otra, en los estantes de la lechería, hasta el punto de que yo pude escribir mi nombre en ellos con la punta del dedo cuando bajé por primera vez la escalera después de mi enfermedad, que el médico dijo ser una inflamación. Fue un milagro que me repusiera. Y a pesar de que hace nueve meses que estás aquí, no vales mucho más, Molly, y no por falta de observaciones por mi parte. ¿Y qué haces aquí plantada, en vez de ir en busca del torno de hilar? Si no empiezas enseguida, llegará la hora en que tengas que dejarlo.

—Mamá, mi plancha está fría. Haz el favor de ponerla al fuego.

La suave y musical voz que hizo esta petición procedía de una niña de cabello rubio que contaría tres o cuatro años y que se sentaba en una silla muy alta, en el extremo de una tabla de planchar, ocupada, con gran ardor, en manejar una plancha diminuta que agarraba con su manita regordeta, planchando unos cuantos trapos con tal afán que sacaba la lengua tanto como le era posible.

—¿Está fría, querida mía? ¡Dios bendiga tu dulce rostro! —dijo la señora Poyser, cuya facilidad en abandonar su tono regañón oficial para adoptar otro cariñoso o familiar era proverbial—. No importa, tu madre ya ha terminado de planchar y ahora va a guardar la tabla y las planchas.

—Mamá, me gustaría ir al granero de Tommy para ver a los talabarteros.

—No, no, Totty se mojaría los pies —dijo la señora Poyser llevándose la plancha—. Vete a la lechería a ver cómo bate la manteca la prima Hetty.

—Me gustaría que me dieses un poco de *plum-cake* —replicó Totty, que parecía estar provista de una serie escalonada de peticiones. Al mismo tiempo, y aprovechando la oportunidad de su inacción momentánea, metió los dedos en una palangana de almidón y los sacó a fin de vaciar su contenido en la sábana de planchar.

—¿Se ha visto nunca cosa semejante? —gritó la señora Poyser corriendo hacia la mesa en cuanto sus ojos cayeron en la azulada corriente de líquido—. Esta niña no hace más que travesuras en cuanto una vuelve la espalda. Ahora verás lo que hago contigo, niña tonta y mala.

Sin embargo, Totty había descendido de su silla con rapidez y emprendió la retirada hacia la lechería, mostrando un paso muy semejante al de los ánades y una cantidad de grasa en el cogote que la hacía parecer una metamorfosis de un lechón blanco.

En cuanto fue recogido el almidón con ayuda de Molly, y así que se hubieron guardado los artefactos de

planchar, la señora Poyser reanudó su obra de calceta, que siempre tenía al alcance de la mano y que era el trabajo que más le gustaba porque podía realizarlo de un modo automático, yendo de un lado para otro. Pero en esa ocasión fue a sentarse frente a Dinah, a quien se quedó mirando con expresión meditabunda, mientras continuaba entretejiendo los hilos de su media de estambre gris.

—Te pareces mucho a tu tía Judith, Dinah, cuando te sientas a coser. A veces me parece verme treinta años atrás, en mi casa, y cuando aún era niña, contemplando a Judith mientras cosía sentada, después de haber terminado de hacer la casa; sólo que aquélla, que pertenecía a mi padre, era pequeña y no una vivienda enorme de esas que se ensucian por un extremo mientras te ocupas de limpiar el otro; a no ser por eso podría imaginarme que eras tú Judith, si bien su cabello era un poco más oscuro que el tuyo y, además, tenía los hombros más anchos y robustos. Judith y yo estábamos siempre juntas, aunque ella tenía unas costumbres muy raras, tanto que tu madre y ella jamás pudieron ponerse de acuerdo. ¡Ah! Qué poco se figuraba tu madre que tendría una hija que se parecería a Judith y que se quedaría huérfana, para que Judith la criase, dándole la leche a cucharadas, cuando ella estuviese enterrada en el cementerio de Stoniton. Yo siempre dije que Judith era capaz de cargar con un peso de una tonelada para evitar que los demás tuviesen que transportar un kilo. Y ya desde el principio, cuando la vi por primera vez, era así, y no advertí ningún cambio en ella, o por lo menos no me di cuenta, cuando se convirtió al metodismo. Sólo hablaba de un modo distinto y llevaba un gorro diferente. Pero nunca en su vida gastó en ella un penique más de lo necesario para vestirse con decencia.

—Era una mujer excelente —replicó Dinah—. Dios le había dado un carácter cariñoso y generoso y lo perfeccionó por medio de la gracia. Y te quería mucho, tía Rachel. Con gran frecuencia le oí hablar de ti con gran afecto. Cuando tuvo aquella grave enfermedad y yo contaba solamente once años, solía decir: «Si el cielo nos separa, tendrás una buena amiga en la tierra en la persona de tu tía Rachel, porque tiene un corazón bondadoso». Y estoy segura de que la pobre tía Judith tenía razón.

—No sé por qué, hija. Todo el mundo haría por ti lo que pudiese. Eres como los pájaros del aire y vives no se sabe cómo. Yo habría tenido mucho gusto de portarme contigo como corresponde a la hermana de tu madre, si vinieses a vivir aquí, donde hay medios de subsistencia para hombres y animales y la gente no vive en montañas peladas donde su vida es como la de las gallinas cuando picotean el suelo. Luego podrías casarte con un hombre decente, pues aquí abundan los que quisieran tenerte por mujer, en el caso de que abandonases tus predicaciones, que son diez veces peores que todo cuanto llegó a hacer tu tía Judith. Y hasta si te casabas con Seth Bede, que es un visionario metodista y que nunca sabrá ahorrar un penique, me consta que tu tío os ayudaría con un cerdo y quizás con una vaca, porque siempre ha querido mucho a mis parientes pobres y los ha recibido muy bien en la casa. Y por ti haría, estoy segura, tanto como ha hecho por Hetty, aunque ésta sea sobrina carnal. También en la casa tenemos ropa blanca que yo podría reservarte, porque tengo gran cantidad de sábanas, de manteles y de toallas que todavía no están hechas. Hay un juego de sábanas que hiló Kittk, una hilandera estupenda a pesar de que era bizca y los niños no podían sufrirla; y además, como ya sabes, nunca se deja de hilar, y en la actualidad se teje más del doble de la ropa vieja que se gasta. Pero comprendo que es inútil hablar, porque no te dejarás persuadir ni querrás establecerte como una mujer de buen sentido, en vez de fatigarte, yendo y viniendo, para predicar, y dando hasta el último penique de lo que ganas, de manera que no tienes nada ahorrado en caso de enfermedad; y estoy segura de que todo lo que has reunido en el mundo formaría un paquete no mayor de un par de quesos. Y todo eso porque has aprendido algunas cosas de la religión que, en resumidas cuentas, no llegan siquiera a lo que se encuentra en el catecismo o en el libro de oraciones.

—Y también en la Biblia, tía —dijo Dinah.

—Sí, y en la Biblia también —replicó la señora Poyser con sequedad—. Si no fuese así, ¿cómo se comprende que los párrocos y la gente que han de dedicarse a estudiarla no sepan de la Biblia más que tú misma o, por lo menos, tanto? Y, por otra parte, fíjate en que si todos hicieran lo que tú, el mundo se detendría y vendría el fin, porque si todos los hombres probasen a vivir sin casa y sin hogar, con poca comida y escasa bebida, y hablasen siempre de despreciar, como tú, las cosas del mundo, me gustaría saber quién se ocuparía de cuidar el ganado, el trigo y de hacer quesos. Todo el mundo mendigaría el pan y también irían al encuentro del prójimo con objeto de predicarle, en vez de dedicarse a criar a sus hijos y ahorrar para el caso de una mala cosecha. Ya se comprende, pues, que esta no podría ser la verdadera práctica de la religión.

—No, querida tía. Nunca me habrás oído decir que todo el mundo deba abandonar su trabajo y a sus familias. Está muy bien que la tierra sea arada y sembrada, almacenado el precioso trigo y cuidadas todas las cosas necesarias de la vida, y también conviene que la gente se complazca en criar sus hijos, en darles de comer y en vestirlos, pero es preciso que hagan todo eso por temor de Dios y sin olvidarse de las

necesidades del alma mientras cuidan de las del cuerpo. Cualquiera que sea nuestra suerte podemos ser servidores de Dios; pero Él nos da distintas clases de trabajo de acuerdo con nuestra capacidad y según cree necesario. Yo no puedo dejar de emplear mi vida en hacer cuanto pueda por las almas de los demás, así como tú tampoco puedes evitar el echar a correr si oyes que la pequeña Totty llora en el extremo opuesto de la casa; su voz penetra en tu corazón y en el acto te figuras que la pobrecilla se halla en peligro y no gozarías de tranquilidad alguna si no fueses a socorrerla o a consolarla.

—¡Ah! —replicó la señora Poyser levantándose y dirigiéndose hacia la puerta—. Comprendo que aunque te hablase horas enteras, siempre contestarías igual. Si quisiera persuadir al arroyo de que detuviese su curso, obtendría el mismo resultado.

La calzada que había en la parte exterior de la puerta de la cocina estaba ya lo bastante seca para que la señora Poyser pudiese permanecer en ella y observar lo que ocurría en el patio. Y mientras tanto, la labor de calceta hacía grandes progresos en sus manos. Mas apenas hacía cinco minutos que estaba allí, cuando volvió a entrar y dijo a Dinah en tono presuroso y asustado a un tiempo:

—Aquí vienen el capitán Donnithorne y el señor Irwine. En este momento atraviesan el patio. Apostaría la cabeza a que han venido a hablar de tu predicación en el parque, Dinah. Debes contestarles tú, porque yo soy muda. Ya he dicho suficiente de los disgustos que acarrearás a la familia de tu tío. Poco me importaría si fueses sobrina del señor Poyser, pues todo el mundo se ve obligado a apoyar a sus parientes consanguíneos, de la misma manera como se defiende la nariz propia, ya que son de la misma carne y de la misma sangre. Pero el hecho de que una sobrina mía sea la causa de que echen a mi marido de su granja, y que yo no haya aportado otra cosa que mis ahorros…

—Nada de eso, querida tía Rachel —replicó Dinah con acento cariñoso—. No debes abrigar esos temores. Estoy segurísima de que ningún mal os ocurrirá, ni a ti y ni a mi tío, ni tampoco a los niños, por culpa de cualquiera de mis actos. Has de saber que no predico sin dirección.

—¿Dirección? Ya sé lo que quieres decir con esta palabra —replicó la señora Poyser haciendo calceta con mayor agitación y rapidez—. Cuando en tu cabeza tienes una fantasía mayor que de costumbre, le das el nombre de «dirección» y entonces nada sería capaz de conmoverla. Te pareces a las estatuas que hay en la fachada de la iglesia de Treddleston: siempre estás con los ojos abiertos y sonriente, tanto si hace tiempo bueno como malo. Créeme que a veces me haces perder la paciencia.

Mientras tanto los dos caballeros habían llegado a la empalizada y echaron pie a tierra. Era evidente que se disponían a entrar en la casa. La señora Poyser fue a la puerta a recibirles e hizo una reverencia, temblando al mismo tiempo a causa de su enojo contra Dinah y de la ansiedad que le producía el deseo de conducirse de un modo apropiado. En aquellos tiempos las más despiertas gentes del campo sentían un asombro y un pasmo extraordinarios al ver a una persona de buena cuna, es decir, lo mismo que los antiguos podían experimentar cuando se ponían de puntillas para observar el paso de los dioses en forma humana.

—¿Qué hay, señora Poyser? ¿Cómo está después de esta tempestuosa mañana? —preguntó el señor Irwine con majestuosa cordialidad—. Llevamos los pies secos y no le ensuciaremos su limpio suelo.

—¡Oh, no vale la pena! —dijo la señora Poyser—. ¿Quieren entrar en el salón, señores?

—No, muchas gracias, señora Poyser —contestó el capitán mirando con gran interés la cocina, como si sus ojos buscasen algo que no pudieran hallar—. Me gusta mucho moverme en su cocina y me parece la estancia más encantadora de cuantas conozco. ¡Ojalá todas las esposas de los granjeros viniesen a tomarla por modelo!

—Es usted muy bondadoso, señor. Háganme el favor de tomar asiento —dijo la señora Poyser algo tranquilizada por este cumplido y por el evidente buen humor del capitán, aunque aún seguía mirando con ansiedad al señor Irwine quien, según pudo ver, miraba a Dinah y se adelantaba hacia ella.

—Poyser no está en casa, ¿verdad? —preguntó el capitán Donnithorne sentándose de tal manera que pudiese ver el corto espacio que había ante la puerta de la lechería.

—No, señor. No está. Ha ido a Rosseter a ver al señor West, el factor, para hablar de la lana. Pero si lo necesita para algo, señor, mi padre está en el granero.

—No, muchas gracias. Me limitaré a ver los cachorros y luego dejaré un recado al pastor con respecto a ellos. Otro día vendré a ver a su esposo. Deseo hablar con él acerca de caballos. ¿Sabe cuándo tendrá un momento?

—Casi siempre le encontrará, señor, a excepción del día de mercado en Treddleston que, como sabe, es el viernes. Si estuviera por la granja podríamos hacerle llamar y le veríamos aquí al cabo de un minuto. Si pudiéramos vendernos los Scantlands, no tendríamos ningún campo situado a tanta distancia; y yo me alegraría mucho, porque cuando ocurre algo no tiene más remedio que ir a esos campos. Parece que las

cosas tengan empeño en ocurrir de un modo desagradable, no es natural tener una parte de la hacienda en un condado y el resto en otro.

—¡Ah! Los Scantlands le convendrían mucho más a la granja de Choyce, especialmente en vista de que él necesita tierra de pastos y a ustedes les sobran. De todos modos, creo que la suya es la granja más hermosa de la propiedad, y ya sabe, señora Poyser, que sí yo me sintiera inclinado a casarme y a establecerme, me vería tentado a hacerle salir de la granja, hacer arreglar esta hermosa casa antigua y convertirme yo mismo en granjero.

—¡Oh, señor! —exclamó alarmada la señora Poyser—. No le gustaría. Y en cuanto a los trabajos de la granja, créame si le digo que consisten en meterse dinero en el bolsillo con la mano derecha y sacarlo con la izquierda. La experiencia me ha demostrado que este trabajo no tiene otro resultado que producir víveres para los demás, sin que le quede a uno para sí mismo y para sus hijos más que un bocado. Desde luego usted no es un pobre hombre que necesite ganarse el pan y podría permitirse el lujo de perder todo el dinero que le diera la gana explotando la hacienda, pero, sin embargo, es muy triste perder dinero, según creo, aunque tengo entendido que los grandes personajes de Londres no se dedican casi a nada más que al juego. Mi marido oyó decir en el mercado que el hijo mayor de lord Dacey ha perdido miles y miles de libras jugando con el príncipe de Gales, y también dice la gente que milady se disponía a empeñar sus joyas para pagar las deudas de su hijo. Pero usted lo sabrá mejor que yo, señor. Y en cuanto a ocuparse de la granja, no comprendo cómo puede gustarle. Y esta casa… tiene unas corrientes de aire capaces de dejarle a uno tieso. Además, creo que los pavimentos del piso están podridos, y en cuanto a las ratas que hay en la cueva, exceden a toda ponderación.

—Me describe un cuadro horrible, señora Poyser; tanto que casi me parece que sería una obra de caridad sacarles de aquí. Pero no hay cuidado. Por lo menos han de pasar veinte años antes de que piense establecerme, es decir, cuando sea un corpulento caballero de cuarenta años. Por otra parte, mi abuelo jamás consentiría en desprenderse de unos arrendatarios como ustedes.

—Pues bien, señor; si tan buena opinión tiene del señor Poyser como arrendatario, me gustaría que influyese en él para que mande poner puertas nuevas en los cercados de Five, porque mi marido se ha cansado ya de pedírselo. ¡Y pensar en lo mucho que él ha hecho por la hacienda sin que jamás le hayan dado un solo penique, tanto si los tiempos han sido buenos como malos! Según he dicho muchas veces a mi marido, estoy persuadida de que si el capitán tuviese algo que ver con ello, las cosas no irían de esta manera. No es que quiera faltar al respeto al amo; pero créame, señor, que muchas veces hemos de aguantar más de lo que consienten las fuerzas humanas. No paramos un momento, nos levantamos temprano y nos acostamos muy tarde, y aun cuando estamos en la cama apenas logramos cerrar los ojos, porque hay que pensar en que se cuaje el queso, en que las vacas pueden malparir o el trigo estropearse en la gavilla. Y luego, al terminar el año, es como si hubiéramos estado guisando la comida de un festín y por toda recompensa sólo nos hubiesen permitido oler los platos.

Una vez la señora Poyser había empezado a hablar, seguía haciéndolo sin pensar ya en el respeto que al principio exteriorizaba por la nobleza. La confianza que sentía en sus propias facultades de exposición era la fuerza motriz que vencía toda resistencia.

—Me temo que si yo hablase de las puertas, señora Poyser, les haría más mal que bien —dijo el capitán —, aunque le aseguro que no hay hombre en la propiedad en favor de quien hablaría con más gusto que de su marido. Me consta que esta granja está mejor regida y ordenada que otra cualquiera en quince kilómetros a la redonda, y en cuanto a la cocina —añadió sonriendo—, no creo que en todo el reino exista otra que la aventaje. Y, ahora que me acuerdo, nunca he visto su lechería, y quisiera visitarla, señora Poyser.

—En realidad, señor, no se halla en el estado debido para que vaya a verla; ahora Hetty está ocupada en batir la manteca porque hoy se ha retrasado todo, y me da vergüenza.

Eso lo dijo la señora Poyser ruborizándose y convencida de que el capitán estaba interesado de veras en sus cubos de leche y la pobre mujer no deseaba otra cosa que hacer concordar la opinión que el caballero tenía con el aspecto de la lechería.

—¡Oh, no tengo ninguna duda de que estará muy ordenada! Haga el favor de acompañarme —dijo el capitán echando a andar y seguido por la señora Poyser.

VII

La lechería

Ciertamente valía la pena visitar la lechería; entrar en ella obligaba a recordar con disgusto las cálidas y polvorientas calles: tal era la fresca fragancia del queso recién prensado y de la dura manteca, la limpieza de los recipientes de madera, constantemente bañados en agua pura, de las vasijas de arcilla, de suave color rojo, llenas de manteca amarillenta, de la madera, de color pardo, de los objetos de estaño pulimentado de las pesas, los ganchos y las bisagras, cubiertos totalmente de óxido de hierro de un tono gris y anaranjado. Pero sólo se recibe una impresión confusa de todos estos detalles cuando rodean a una preciosa muchacha de diecisiete años, calzada con zuecos diminutos, que estira su brazo lleno de hoyuelos para sacar una libra de manteca del platillo de la balanza.

Hetty se sonrojó cuando el capitán Donnithorne entró en la lechería y le dirigió la palabra, pero no fue un sonrojo desagradable, pues lo acompañaban sonrisas y algunos centelleos de la mirada que surgían entre las largas y rizadas pestañas. Entre tanto, su tía hablaba con el caballero acerca de la escasa cantidad de leche que podía reservar para hacer manteca y queso mientras los terneros no hubieran sido destetados, y de la leche de inferior calidad que daban las vacas de cuernos cortos que habían llevado a la granja para hacer un experimento; así como de otros asuntos que pudieran ser interesantes para un joven caballero que un día sería el propietario. Mientras tanto, Hetty seguía manejando su libra de manteca con aire coquetón y totalmente convencida de que no pasaba inadvertido ni uno solo de los movimientos de su cabeza.

Existen varias categorías de belleza que obligan a los hombres a cometer diferentes tipos de tonterías, desde mostrarse desesperado a dejarse dominar por la timidez; pero hay una clase de belleza que parece hacer perder la cabeza no sólo a los hombres, sino también a todos los mamíferos inteligentes, incluyendo las mujeres. Es una belleza semejante a la de los gatitos o a la de los polluelos de pato que emiten leves y suaves ruidos con sus blancos picos, o a la de los niños que empiezan a gatear y a hacer travesuras conscientes. Es una belleza contra la que nadie puede enojarse, pero que, a veces, nos sentimos inclinados a destruir, comprendiendo la imposibilidad de formarnos una clara idea del estado en que nos sume. Hetty Sorrel poseía esta belleza. Su tía, la señora Poyser, que se envanecía de despreciar todos los atractivos personales y deseaba parecer la más severa de las señoras, continuamente contemplaba a hurtadillas los encantos de Hetty, fascinada a pesar de sí misma; y después de dirigirle una reprimenda, hija de su deseo de hacer bien a la sobrina de su esposo, pues la pobrecilla carecía de madre que pudiese regañarla, solía confesar a su marido, cuando nadie podía oírles, que tenía la convicción de que cuantas más tonterías hiciese aquella muchacha más guapa estaba.

Es, pues, inútil que me moleste en decir que las mejillas de Hetty parecían pétalos de rosa, que los hoyuelos jugaban en torno a sus carnosos y bien dibujados labios, que sus enormes ojos negros escondían una suave expresión traviesa bajo sus largas pestañas y que su cabello rizado, aunque lo llevaba peinado hacia atrás y debajo de su gorrito, mientras se entregaba al trabajo formaba unos preciosos rizos en la frente y alrededor de las nacaradas orejas; también es inútil que me esfuerce en dar a entender cuán hermoso era el contorno de su pañuelo rojo y blanco, que rodeaba la armoniosa parte superior de su cuerpo, o cómo el delantal de hilo que llevaba, mientras se ocupaba en batir la manteca, parecía algo digno de ser imitado en seda por una duquesa, pues caía con unos pliegues encantadores, o cómo sus medias de color pardo y sus zapatos con hebilla perdían toda la vulgaridad que sin duda alguna tendrían si no calzaran aquellos pies y aquellos tobillos; es decir, que todo cuanto yo pudiera escribir ahora sería inútil si el lector no hubiese visto a una mujer que, como Hetty, impresiona a todos cuanto la miran, ya que, de otra suerte, aunque resultara

posible imaginarse a una mujer hermosa, no se parecería en nada a aquella encantadora muchacha de gracia felina. Podría mencionar también los divinos encantos de un hermoso día de primavera, pero si el lector no se hubiese olvidado jamás de sí mismo para entretenerse contemplando el vuelo de la alondra o jamás hubiese recorrido los tranquilos senderos, cuando las flores recién abiertas los llenan de una belleza sagrada y silenciosa como la de las calladas naves de una iglesia, ¿de qué serviría el uso de mi catálogo descriptivo? Jamás podría explicar lo que entiendo por un brillante día de primavera. Hetty era una belleza primaveral, poseía la hermosura de las cosas jóvenes y retozonas, sus miembros eran redondeados y su humor juguetón, y daba a quien la miraba la impresión falsa de ser inocente en grado sumo, de poseer la inocencia de un ternerillo que tiene una estrella en la frente, por ejemplo, y que al ser llevado a pasear obliga a su acompañante a emprender con él una dura carrera de obstáculos, saltando los setos y las zanjas, y deteniéndose tan sólo al llegar al centro de un pantano.

Existen hermosísimas actitudes y posturas que puede adoptar una hermosa joven cuando se ocupa de preparar la manteca: algunas dan una curva encantadora a los brazos y una inclinación lateral al redondo y blanco cuello. Otras veces se ve obligada a golpear o a amasar con la palma de la mano, a realizar pequeños movimientos y a dar toques finales que no pueden llevarse a cabo sin que en ellos participe el fruncimiento de los labios y las miradas de los negros ojos. Además, la misma manteca parece proporcionar un encanto adicional. ¡Es tan pura, tiene un aroma tan suave, sale del molde con una superficie tan bella y firme! ¡Parece mármol alumbrado por una luz amarillenta! Hetty era asimismo muy hábil haciendo manteca; precisamente era aquélla una de sus ocupaciones que la tía dejaba pasar sin pronunciar crítica alguna, y así la joven manejaba la manteca con toda la gracia de una maestra.

—Espero que estará dispuesta para una gran fiesta el día 13 de julio, señora Poyser —dijo el capitán Donnithorne en cuanto hubo admirado lo bastante la lechería y dado algunas opiniones improvisadas acerca de los nabos suecos y de las vacas de cortos cuernos—. Ya sabe lo que ocurrirá entonces, y espero que usted será una de las invitadas que venga antes y se marche más tarde. ¿Quiere prometerme su mano para dos bailes, señorita Hetty? Si no tengo ahora su promesa, me consta que apenas tendré luego una oportunidad, porque los jóvenes granjeros se apresurarán a comprometeros todos los bailes.

Hetty sonrió y se sonrojó, pero antes de que pudiera contestar se interpuso la señora Poyser, escandalizada ante la idea de que el joven pudiese quedar excluido por otros muchachos de menor categoría.

—Realmente, señor, es demasiado bondadoso para fijarse en ella. Y estoy segura de que cuando se digne aceptarla por pareja, ella se sentirá orgullosa y agradecida, aunque no baile más durante el resto de la fiesta.

—¡Oh, no, no! Eso sería una crueldad para todos los muchachos que desean bailar con ella. Pero me promete dos bailes, ¿verdad, Hetty? —continuó diciendo el capitán, decidido a obligar a la joven a mirarle y a responderle.

Hetty esbozó una preciosa sonrisa y le dirigió una mirada tímida y coqueta a la vez.

—Sí, señor, muchas gracias.

—Y también quiero que lleve a todos sus hijos, señora Poyser, tanto a la pequeña Totty como a los muchachos. Quiero que concurran a la fiesta todos los niños de la propiedad, todos los que serán espléndidos muchachos y preciosas jóvenes cuando yo me haya convertido en un viejo calvo.

—¡Oh, señor, para eso ha de pasar todavía mucho tiempo! —replicó la señora Poyser anonadada al ver que el joven caballero hablaba con tanta ligereza de sí mismo, y pensando que su marido sentiría interés por oír su relato de aquella notable muestra de distinguido buen humor.

Se decía del capitán que era muy bromista y en toda la propiedad se le quería a causa de sus maneras afables. Todos los arrendatarios estaban seguro de que las cosas cambiarían en extremo cuando las riendas fuesen a parar a sus manos, pues entonces habría una extraordinaria abundancia de puertas nuevas, grandes cantidades de cemento y beneficios del diez por ciento.

—¿Dónde está hoy Totty? —dijo—. Me gustaría verla.

—¿Dónde está la pequeña, Hetty? —preguntó la señora Poyser—. Hace un momento ha venido para acá.

—No sé. Se ha ido con Nancy a la cervecería.

La orgullosa madre, incapaz de resistir a la tentación de exhibir a su Totty, se dirigió en el acto a la cocina de la parte posterior en busca de la niña, aunque no sin temerse que hubiese ocurrido algo que pusiera a la pequeña en un estado poco apropiado para ser presentada.

—¿Y lleva usted la manteca al mercado después de hacerla? —preguntó mientras tanto el capitán a Hetty.

—¡Oh, no, señor! Pesa mucho y no soy lo bastante fuerte para llevarla. Alick la transporta a caballo.

—No. Estoy seguro de que sus bonitos brazos no fueron creados para llevar tales pesos. Pero supongo que alguna de estas tardes agradables saldrá a dar un paseo. ¿Por qué no va alguna vez al cazadero, ahora que está tan verde y agradable? Apenas la veo en ninguna parte, salvo en su casa y en la iglesia.

—A mi tía no le gusta que vaya a pasear y sólo me deja salir para hacer alguna cosa. Pero algunas veces he atravesado el cazadero.

—¿Y no va nunca a visitar a la señora West, el ama de llaves? Me parece que una vez la vi en su habitación.

—No voy a ver a la señora West, sino a la señora Pomfret, la doncella. Me enseña un punto de bordado y a componer encajes. Mañana por la tarde iré a tomar el té con ella.

La razón de que hubiese habido tiempo suficiente para aquel *tête-à-tête* sólo puede comprenderse mirando en la cocina posterior, donde Totty fue hallada en el acto de frotarse contra la nariz un saquito de azul para la ropa; algunas gotas de índigo habían caído en su delantalito. Pero pronto apareció en la lechería de la mano de su madre y con el extremo de su redonda naricita brillante, a causa del rápido lavatorio con agua y jabón de que acababa de ser objeto.

—Aquí está —dijo el capitán levantándola y sentándola en el estante de piedra—. Aquí está Totty. ¿Y cómo se llama, en realidad? Porque estoy seguro de que no la bautizaron con este nombre.

—Mucho sentimos, señor, no llamarle con el suyo propio. En el bautizo se le puso Charlotte, bastante frecuente en la familia del señor Poyser: así se llama la abuela de la niña. Pero empezamos a llamarla Totty y al final su nombre se ha convertido en Totty. Es nombre de perro más que de una niña cristiana.

—Nada de eso. Totty es un nombre estupendo y tiene aspecto de *totty*[4]. ¿Tiene algún bolsillo la niña? —preguntó el capitán buscando en los de su chaleco.

Inmediatamente Totty se levantó el delantal con gravedad y mostró un diminuto bolsillo rojo que, a la sazón, estaba vacío por completo.

—No tengo nada dentro —dijo muy seria contemplándolo.

—¿No? ¡Qué lástima! ¡Un bolsillo tan bonito! En fin. Le pondremos unas cosas que harán un ruido agradable. Sí. Aquí tenemos cinco cosas redondas, de plata, que sonarán de un modo muy agradable en el bolsillo rojo de Totty.

Agitó el bolsillo con las cinco monedas de seis peniques, y Totty enseñó los dientes y arrugó la naricita con inmensa alegría; pero adivinando que de allí ya no sacaría más, saltó al suelo y fue a agitar su bolsillito a oídos de Nancy, mientras su madre gritaba:

—¡Oh, qué niña tan mala! ¿No te da vergüenza? Su padre no quiere que se la regañe, y así no hay modo de educarla. Hay que tener en cuenta que es la más pequeña y, además, la única niña de la familia.

—¡Oh! Es muy graciosa y parece un rollo de manteca. No me gustaría que fuese de otro modo. Ahora supongo que debo marcharme, porque el rector me está esperando.

Después de decir adiós y de dirigir una brillante mirada y una inclinación de cabeza a Hetty, Arthur salió de la lechería. Pero se equivocó al figurarse que el rector le estaría esperando, pues éste estaba interesado hasta tal punto en la conversación con Dinah que, por su gusto, no la habría interrumpido antes; y a continuación sabrá el lector lo que se dijeron.

VIII

UNA VOCACIÓN

Dinah, que se había puesto en pie cuando entraron los dos caballeros sin dejar de sostener la sábana que estaba remendando, hizo una reverente inclinación al ver que el señor Irwine la miraba y avanzaba hacia ella. Jamás le había hablado, y al cruzarse ahora su mirada con la de la joven, su primer pensamiento fue: «Tiene aspecto de ser una muchacha de muy buenas cualidades. ¡Oh, si en este suelo cayese la buena semilla con seguridad germinaría!». Y se inclinó ante ella con la misma deferencia que podría haber mostrado a cualquiera de las dignas señoras que conocía.

—Según tengo entendido, está usted de paso en esta vecindad —dijo al sentarse frente a la joven.

—Sí, señor. He venido de Snowfield, en Stonyshire. Mi tía, que es muy buena, ha querido que descanse aquí unos días de mi trabajo, porque he estado enferma.

—¡Ah! Recuerdo muy bien Snowfield. Una vez tuve ocasión de ir allá. Es un lugar muy triste y desolado. Entonces construían una fábrica de hilados de algodón, pero ya han pasado muchos años de eso. Supongo que el lugar habrá cambiado gracias al trabajo que proporcionará la fábrica.

—En efecto, ha cambiado. La fábrica ha atraído a mucha gente, que se gana la vida trabajando en ella; también los comerciantes hacen mejores negocios. Yo misma trabajo allí y tengo razones para estar agradecida, porque gano lo suficiente para vivir e incluso ahorrar algo. Pero sigue siendo un lugar muy triste, como usted dice, caballero, y muy distinto de esta región.

—Probablemente tiene allí algunos parientes, y se siente atada al lugar, considerándolo como suyo.

—En otro tiempo tuve allí una tía, que me crió, pues yo era huérfana. Pero murió hace siete años y ahora no tengo parientes conocidos si se exceptúa a mi tía Poyser, que es muy buena conmigo y que desearía que viviese en este lugar, sin duda excelente y donde abunda el pan. Pero no estoy en libertad de abandonar Snowfield, donde parece que me plantaron y he crecido como la hierba en lo alto de la colina.

—Quizás tiene allí muchos amigos y compañeros de religión. Creo que es metodista…, y que sigue las doctrinas de Wesley.

—Si, mi tía de Snowfield pertenecía a la Sociedad y tengo razones para agradecer el privilegio de haber formado parte de ella desde mi primera infancia.

—¿Y hace mucho tiempo que predica? Porque tengo entendido que ayer tarde lo hizo en Hayslope.

—Hace cuatro años que emprendí este trabajo; cuando tenía veintiuno.

—De modo que su Sociedad sanciona la predicación de las mujeres… —dijo él.

—No lo prohíbe, señor, cuando hay una decidida vocación por este trabajo y cuando tal ministerio está encaminado a la conversión de los pecadores y a vigorizar el pueblo de Dios. La señora Fletcher, de quien tal vez habrá oído hablar, fue la primera mujer de la Sociedad que predicó, creo que antes de casarse, cuando era la señorita Bosanquet, y el señor Wesley aprobó su trabajo. Tenía grandes dotes y ahora existen otras muchas que son grandes auxiliares en la obra del ministerio. Tengo entendido que últimamente se han levantado algunas voces contra la Sociedad, pero creo firmemente que tales protestas no tendrán efecto alguno. No corresponde a los hombres trazar los caminos para el espíritu de Dios como trazan canales para las corrientes de agua y dicen: «Corre por aquí, pero no por allí».

—¿Pero no se cree en peligro entre su gente? Desde luego no quiero indicar, ni mucho menos, que usted pudiera tener la culpa; ¿pero no observáis algunas veces que tanto los hombres como las mujeres creen equivocados los canales abiertos para el espíritu de Dios y por eso emprenden un trabajo para el que carecen de condiciones y desdeñan las cosas santas?

—Sin duda así ocurre a veces, porque entre nosotros ha habido algunos malvados que han tratado de engañar a los hermanos en Jesucristo, y también los hay que se engañan a sí mismos. Pero no carecemos de disciplina y de correcciones para impedir estas cosas. Entre nosotros se observa un orden estricto, y los hermanos y hermanas vigilan las almas de los demás, como si debieran dar cuenta de ellas. ¿No sigue cada uno su propio camino, preguntándose: «Soy yo el guardián de mi hermano»?

—Pero dígame, si me permite que se lo pregunte, pues me interesa mucho saberlo, ¿cómo se le ocurrió pensar en predicar?

—El caso es, señor, que no pensé en ello. Desde los dieciséis años estaba acostumbrada a hablar con los niños y a enseñarles, y algunas veces parecía como sí el corazón me incitase a hablar en la clase, y también me gustaba rezar con los enfermos. Mas no sentía ninguna llamada hacia la predicación, pues en mi fuero interno prefiero estar sola y entregada a mis propios pensamientos. Parece como si pudiera permanecer en silencio todo el día con la idea de Dios rebosando en mi alma, del mismo modo que los cantos rodados están bañados por el agua del arroyo del Sauce. Porque los pensamientos son muy grandes… ¿Verdad, caballero? Parecen dominarnos como si fuesen una corriente profunda; y entonces me veo obligada a olvidar dónde estoy y todo lo que me rodea, extraviándome en ideas que no podría explicar, pues no hallaría el modo de expresarlas por medio de palabras. Eso es lo que me ocurría, según creo recordar; pero a veces parecía como si se me presentaran las palabras sin esfuerzo alguno por mi parte y éstas eran capaces de hacer derramar lágrimas, porque nuestros corazones están llenos y no podemos remediarlo. Aquellos eran tiempos de gran bendición, aunque nunca se me ocurrió pensar en ponerme delante de un grupo de gente. Sin embargo, señor, somos guiados y conducidos como niños y de una forma que ignoramos. Repentinamente me sentí llamada a predicar, y a partir de aquel momento jamás he tenido ninguna duda de que me había sido confiada esa tarea.

—Pero dígame las circunstancias… ¿Cómo ocurrió el día en que empezó a predicar?

—Era un domingo y yo iba en compañía del hermano Marlowe, hombre anciano y uno de los predicadores locales, y nos dirigíamos a Hetton-Deeps, que es un pueblo en que la gente se gana la vida trabajando en las minas de plomo y donde no hay iglesia ni predicador, de modo que viven como rebaño sin pastor. Está a más de veinte kilómetros de Snowfield, así que salimos temprano, por la mañana, porque era verano. Y experimentaba un maravilloso sentimiento del amor divino mientras cruzábamos las montañas, donde no hay árboles, ya sabe, como aquí, lo que hace que el cielo parezca más pequeño, de modo que se ve el firmamento extendido en todas direcciones y uno siente a su alrededor los brazos eternos. Pero antes de llegar a Hetton, el hermano Marlowe sintió un vahído que le hizo temer que se caería al suelo, porque el pobre trabajaba más de lo que consentían sus fuerzas a sus años, velando, predicando y recorriendo muchos kilómetros para difundir la Palabra, así como para dedicarse a su oficio de tejedor.

»Cuando llegamos al pueblo la gente le estaba aguardando, porque ya les había señalado la hora del día, así como el lugar, la vez anterior en que estuvo allí, y los que deseaban oír la Palabra de la vida se habían congregado en un lugar en que las casas eran más numerosas, por si había más gente que quería acudir al sermón. Pero mi compañero comprendió que no podría ponerse en pie para predicar y se vio obligado a tenderse y descansar en una de las casas. Por esa razón me acerqué a los reunidos, figurándome que iríamos a una casa, para decirles que yo leería y rezaría con ellos. Pero al pasar a lo largo de las casitas vi a las viejas y temblorosas mujeres asomadas a las puertas y observé las duras miradas de los hombres, que parecían tener los ojos tan llenos de la visión de la mañana del Sabbath como los mudos bueyes, que jamás levantan los ojos al cielo. Entonces sentí gran agitación en mi alma y temblé como si me estremeciese porque un fuerte espíritu penetrara en mi débil cuerpo. Y me encaminé al lugar en que el pequeño grupo se había reunido, me encaramé sobre la cerca del prado, por el lado de la colina, y pronuncié las palabras que acudían a mis labios y que me fueron dadas en abundancia. Y todos vinieron desde distintas casas y muchos lloraron por sus pecados, de modo que desde entonces se han reconciliado con el Señor. Éste fue el principio de mis predicaciones, y desde entonces he seguido predicando.

Durante su narración, hecha con su sencillez habitual, pero con la voz sincera, muy bien modulada y algo temblorosa con que dominaba a sus oyentes, Dinah había dejado caer la labor. Se inclinó para recoger su costura y continuó su relato. El señor Irwine estaba muy interesado, y se dijo: «Sería un miserable pedante si hiciera de pedagogo. Eso equivaldría a dar lecciones a los árboles para que crezcan de su propia forma».

—¿Y jamás ha sentido algún apuro al pensar en su juventud, y no ha recordado nunca que es una mujer joven y hermosa, en cuyo rostro se fijan los ojos de los hombres? —preguntó.

—No, no me queda tiempo ni ocasión para tales ideas y me figuro que la gente no se fija en nada de eso cuando Dios hace sentir su presencia a través de nosotros, pues entonces somos igual que la mata ardiendo.

Moisés jamás se fijó en cuál era la mata que ardía, pues sólo vio el resplandor del Señor. He predicado a gente ruda e ignorante, como la de los pueblos que rodean Snowfield, a hombres que tienen un aspecto rudo y montaraz, pero jamás me han dicho una palabra grosera y muchas veces me han dado las gracias con bondad cuando se apartaban a un lado para abrirme paso.

—Eso sí que lo creo… Eso puedo creerlo —exclamó el señor Irwine con énfasis—. ¿Y qué opinión se formó de sus oyentes de ayer? ¿Los encontró apacibles y atentos?

—Muy apacibles, señor. Pero no vi señales de que se impresionaran mucho, a excepción de una muchacha llamada Bess Cranage, de la que se apiadó en gran manera mi corazón, cuando mis ojos se fijaron en su lozana juventud, dedicada por entero a la locura y a la vanidad. Pero he observado que en los pueblos en que la gente lleva una vida apacible, entre los prados verdes y las aguas mansas, cultivando la tierra y cuidando del ganado, hay cierta indiferencia hacia la Palabra, cosa muy distinta de lo que ocurre en las grandes ciudades, como Leeds, adonde fui una vez a visitar a una santa mujer que predica allí. Es maravillosa la cosecha de almas que se recoge en aquellas calles de altas casas, donde al andar uno puede creerse en el patio de una prisión y los oídos ensordecen por el estruendo del trabajo mundano. Me parece que la promesa es más dulce cuando la vida es tan desagradable y fatigosa, que el alma está más hambrienta cuando el cuerpo sufre incomodidades.

—La verdad es que nuestros agricultores no son gente que se impresione fácilmente. Toman la vida con la misma calma que las ovejas y las vacas. Sin embargo tenemos por aquí algunos trabajadores inteligentes. Es muy posible que conozca a los Bede. Y, dicho sea de paso, Seth Bede es metodista.

—Sí, conozco bien a Seth y un poco a su hermano Adam. Aquél es un muchacho muy agradable, sincero, incapaz de ofender a nadie; Adam se parece al patriarca José, por su gran habilidad y conocimiento, así como por la bondad que muestra por su hermano y sus padres.

—Tal vez ignore la desgracia que ha caído sobre ellos. Su padre, Mathias Bede, se ahogó anoche en el arroyo del Sauce, no lejos de la puerta de su casa. Ahora voy a visitar a Adam.

—¡Oh! ¡Pobre madre! —exclamó Dinah dejando caer las manos y mirando ante sí con ojos compasivos, como si viese al objeto de su simpatía—. La pobrecilla tendrá un gran disgusto, pues Seth me ha dicho que su corazón está siempre inquieto y turbado. Iré a ver si puedo ayudarla en algo.

Cuando ya se levantaba y empezaba a doblar su labor, el capitán Donnithorne, que había agotado ya todos los pretextos plausibles para quedarse entre los jarros de leche, salió de la lechería seguido por la señora Poyser. El señor Irwine se levantó a su vez y, acercándose a Dinah, le tendió la mano y le dijo:

—¡Adiós! Tengo entendido que se marcha usted en breve. Pero ésta no será la última visita que hará usted a su tía, de modo que, según espero, volveremos a encontrarnos.

Su cordialidad con respecto a Dinah tranquilizó los temores de la señora Poyser, de modo que su rostro estaba más satisfecho que de ordinario cuando dijo:

—No he preguntado por la señora Irwine y por las señoritas Irwine, señor. Espero que estarán tan bien como de costumbre.

—Sí, muchas gracias, señora Poyser. Exceptuando, quizás, la señorita Anne, que hoy tiene uno de sus dolores de cabeza. Y, ahora que me acuerdo, a todos nos gustaron mucho aquellos excelentes quesos de nata que nos mandó. A mi madre más que a nadie.

—Me alegro mucho, señor. Pocas veces los hago, pero me acordé de que a la señora Irwine le gustan mucho. Tenga la bondad de trasmitirle mis respetos, así como también a la señorita Kate y a la señorita Anne. Hace mucho tiempo que no han venido a visitar mi gallinero; mientras tanto he adquirido unas hermosas gallinas moteadas de blanco y negro, y estoy segura de que a la señorita Kate le gustaría mucho tener algunas entre las suyas.

—Pues bien, ya se lo diré. Y vendrá a verlas. Adiós —dijo el rector montando a caballo.

—Vaya despacio, Irwine —dijo el capitán Donnithorne montando a su vez—. Quiero hablarle al pastor de los cachorros. Adiós, señora Poyser. Diga a su esposo que volveré para charlar largo y tendido.

La señora Poyser hizo una reverencia y se quedó mirando los dos caballos hasta que salieron del patio con gran excitación de los cerdos y de las gallinas y mayor indignación del *bull-dog*, el cual ejecutó una danza pírrica que a cada momento amenazaba con romper su cadena. A la señora Poyser le gustó tan ruidosa salida, pues ello era una prueba evidente de que el patio de la granja estaba bien guardado y de que ningún curioso podía entrar sin ser descubierto. Y hasta que la puerta no se hubo cerrado, después de dar paso al capitán, no volvió a su cocina, donde Dinah, con el gorro en la mano, la esperaba para hablar con ella antes de salir en dirección de la casita de Lisbeth Bede.

Pero a pesar de que la señora Poyser se fijó en el gorro, fingió por un momento que no lo había visto, pues primero deseaba descargar la sorpresa que le había producido el comportamiento del señor Irwine.

—¿De modo que el señor Irwine no está enojado? ¿Qué te ha dicho, Dinah? ¿Te ha regañado por predicar?

—No ha demostrado el menor enfado, sino que, por el contrario, me ha tratado con mucho cariño. Me gustó hablar con él, aunque ignoro la causa, pues siempre le creí un mundano saduceo. Pero su semblante es tan agradable como el sol de la mañana.

—¿Agradable? Pues ¿qué te figurabas? —exclamó la señora Poyser impaciente y reanudando su labor de calceta—. Naturalmente que tiene un rostro agradable. Además, es un caballero correcto, de buena cuna, y tiene una madre que más bien parece un cuadro. Si quieres puedes recorrer la comarca, y no encontrarás a ninguna mujer de sesenta y tres años como ella. Y créeme, los domingos vale la pena ver a un hombre como ése subido en el púlpito. Como he dicho muchas veces a Poyser, es como contemplar un campo de trigo maduro o un hermoso prado lleno de vacas. Eso te hace pensar en que el mundo es muy cómodo. En cambio la gente a quienes vosotros los metodistas tratáis, tanto me daría contemplarla como a un rebaño de vacas tísicas en un prado comunal. ¡Vaya gente! No parece sino que nunca hayan comido nada mejor que unas cortezas de tocino y tortas agrias. ¿Y qué dijo el señor Irwine de la tontería de predicar en el parque?

—Solamente que se había enterado, mas no pareció estar enojado. Pero mira, querida tía, no pienses más en eso. Me dijo una cosa que, con seguridad, te apenará, como me ha ocurrido a mí. Mathias Bede se ahogó anoche en el arroyo del Sauce y creo que su anciana mujer tendrá gran necesidad de consuelo. Quizás yo le seré útil y por eso he ido a buscar mi gorro; voy a salir.

—Pero querida mía, antes toma una taza de té —dijo la señora Poyser, pasando del tono agudo al natural—. El agua está hirviendo, de modo que dentro de un minuto estará preparado. También los niños querrán tomar. No tengo ningún inconveniente en que vayas a ver a esa pobre anciana, pues siempre te reciben bien en las casas de los que sufren, tanto si eres metodista como si no, pues las personas se diferencian por la sangre que corre por sus venas. Algunos quesos se hacen de leche desnatada y otros de leche fresca, y poco importa el nombre que les des, porque de sobra conocerás por el olor y el sabor cómo han sido hechos. En cuanto a Mathias Bede, es mucho mejor que se haya… ¡Dios me perdone por hablar así!, pues en estos últimos diez años no ha hecho otra cosa que dar numerosos disgustos a su familia. Creo también que deberías llevarte una botella de ron para la viuda, porque la pobre jamás ha tomado una gota de nada que conforte su cuerpo. Ahora, siéntate, hija, y tranquilízate, pues te advierto que no te dejaré marchar sin haber tomado el té.

Durante la última parte de esta oración, la señora Poyser tomó de los estantes las tazas de té y se dirigía a la despensa en busca de pan, seguida de cerca por Totty, que se apresuró a aparecer en cuanto oyó ruido de tazas, cuando Hetty salió de la lechería, estiró los brazos para desperezarse y luego unió las manos por detrás de su cabeza.

—Molly —dijo con cierta languidez—, hazme el favor de salir en busca de un ramo de hojas de bardana que la manteca ya está a punto y puede empaquetarse.

—¿Ya sabes lo ocurrido, Hetty? —preguntó su tía.

—¿Cómo quieres que haya oído nada? —contestó la joven en tono áspero.

—Aunque lo hubieses oído no te importaría gran cosa, estoy segura, porque eres tan ligera de cascos que poco te impresionaría la muerte de todo el mundo si pudieras ir a acicalarte dos horas ante el espejo. Cualquiera, sin embargo, lamentaría que te ocurriese algo parecido, aunque no lo merezcas. Por lo que a ti te importa ya podían ahogarse Adam Bede y toda su familia, porque al minuto siguiente de darte la noticia estarías engalanándote delante del espejo.

—¿Que Adam Bede… se ha ahogado? —exclamó Hetty dejando caer los brazos muy extrañada, aunque sospechando que su tía exageraba, como de costumbre, con algún objeto didáctico.

—No, querida mía —contestó Dinah con bondadoso acento, porque la señora Poyser se había encaminado a la despensa sin dignarse a dar una información más exacta—. No le ha ocurrido nada a Adam, sino que el ahogado es su anciano padre. Lo encontraron ayer noche sumergido en el arroyo del Sauce. El señor Irwine acaba de decírnoslo.

—¡Oh! ¡Qué horror! —dijo Hetty poniéndose seria, aunque no parecía muy afectada por la noticia.

Y como en aquel momento entró Molly con las hojas de bardana, las tomó en silencio y volvió a la lechería sin hacer ninguna otra pregunta.

IX

El mundo de Hetty

Mientras arreglaba las anchas hojas que daban realce a la manteca olorosa y pálida, de la misma forma que las prímulas destacan en su nido verde, me temo que Hetty pensaba más en las miradas del capitán Donnithorne que en Adam y en su dolor. Miradas vivas de admiración de un joven y guapo caballero de manos blancas, que llevaba una cadena de oro, que a veces vestía de uniforme y que poseía riquezas y grandeza inconmensurables: éstos eran los cálidos rayos que hacían vibrar el pobre corazoncito de Hetty en imprudentes melodías que se repetían una y otra vez. Sabemos que la estatua de Memnon[5] no emitía sus melodías bajo el empuje poderoso del huracán o respondiendo a otra influencia divina o humana, sino que los dejaba oír en cuanto recibía, por la mañana, unos suaves rayos de sol; y hemos de acostumbrarnos al descubrimiento de que algunos de esos raros instrumentos, llamados alas humanas, tienen una escala musical limitada y no vibran al recibir un contacto cualquiera de los que llenan a las demás de temblorosa dicha o de estremecedora agonía.

Hetty estaba ya acostumbrada a la idea de que la gente la admirase. Había advertido que el joven Luke Britton, de Broxton, fue a la iglesia de Hayslope un domingo por la tarde sólo para verla, y que no habría dejado de insinuarse algo más de no interponerse su tío Poyser, que no tenía muy buena opinión de un joven cuyo padre poseía unas tierras tan malas como eran las del viejo Luke Britton, por lo que impidió a su mujer alentar al muchacho mostrándose amable. Estaba enterada de que el señor Craig, el jardinero del cazadero, estaba loco perdido por ella y que últimamente había dado a entender su pasión de un modo inequívoco en forma de deliciosas frases y guisantes hiperbólicos; aun sabía mejor que Adam Bede, el alto, erguido y valeroso Adam Bede, que ejercía tanta autoridad en todos los que le rodeaban y a quien su tío veía siempre con placer, afirmando que «Adam sabía bastante más de la naturaleza de las cosas que sus superiores en saber», aquel Adam que, con frecuencia, se mostraba severo con los demás y no parecía inclinado a correr detrás de las muchachas, palidecía o se sonrojaba por una mirada o por una palabra que ella le dirigiera. La esfera de comparación de Hetty no era muy grande, pero no por eso dejaba de advertir que Adam era «un hombre». Siempre tenía respuestas para todo; aconsejó a su tío cómo apuntalar el cobertizo y en un abrir y cerrar de ojos arregló la mantequera; con sólo una mirada podía calcular el valor del nogal desarraigado por el huracán y conocer la causa de la humedad en las paredes, así mismo sabía cómo impedir el aumento de las ratas. Escribía con una hermosa letra que cualquiera podía leer, y además era capaz de calcular mentalmente, habilidad del todo desconocida entre los más ricos granjeros de la región. No se parecía en nada a aquel huraño Luke Britton, quien, al acompañar a la joven desde Broxton a Hayslope, sólo rompió el silencio para observar que los ánades grises habían empezado a poner huevos. En cuanto al señor Craig, el jardinero, era un hombre bastante agradable, pero patizambo, y cuando hablaba canturreaba de un modo especial; además, y siendo caritativa, le ponía más de cuarenta años.

Hetty estaba completamente segura de que a su tío le gustaría que alentase a Adam y de que le complacería en extremo que se casase con él. Aquellos eran tiempos en que no existía una rígida demarcación de rango entre el granjero y el respetable artesano, y en el hogar y también en la taberna podía vérseles tomar juntos un jarro de cerveza. El granjero tenía un sentido latente de capital y de peso en los asuntos de la parroquia, que compensaba su evidente inferioridad en la conversación. Martin Poyser no frecuentaba las tabernas, pero le gustaba mantener una conversación amistosa bebiendo la cerveza que él mismo se hacía en casa; y aunque era agradable demostrar la superioridad sobre un vecino tonto, que no sabía la manera de lograr los mejores resultados en su propia granja, también era agradable aprender algo

de un individuo tan inteligente como Adam Bede. Así pues, durante los tres últimos años, desde que había dirigido la construcción del nuevo granero, Adam fue siempre bien acogido en Hall Farm, especialmente en las tardes de invierno, cuando toda la familia, según la costumbre patriarcal: amo y ama, hijos y criados se reunían en la magnífica cocina a distancias bien graduadas del fuego resplandeciente. Y durante los dos últimos años, por lo menos, Hetty adquirió la costumbre de oír decir a su tío: «Aunque Adam Bede trabaje ahora para ganar un jornal, llegará el día en que será maestro, y esto con tanta seguridad como estoy sentado aquí. Maese Burge hace bien al desear que ese muchacho se asocie con él y se case con su hija, si es verdad lo que dicen; y la mujer que se case con él hará una buena boda, tanto si ésta se celebra el día de la Virgen como el día de San Miguel». A esta observación la señora Poyser daba siempre su cordial asentimiento. «¡Ah! —decía—. Es muy agradable conseguir un marido que ya sea rico, pero puede muy bien suceder que también sea tonto. Y es inútil llenarse de dinero el bolsillo si éste tiene un agujero. Y tampoco sirve de nada sentarse en un coche propio si el caballo es perezoso, porque muy pronto nos meterá en una zanja. Siempre dije que no me casaría con un hombre que careciese de inteligencia pues ¿de qué le serviría a una mujer tener buen seso si se casara con un tonto que sea el hazmerreír de la gente? Eso sería como vestir con un traje elegante para montar en un asno mirando hacia la cola».

Estas expresiones, aunque metafóricas, indicaban sobradamente las ideas de la señora Poyser con respecto a Adam; y aunque ella y su marido pudiesen haber considerado el asunto de un modo distinto de haber sido Hetty hija suya, era evidente que habrían acogido muy bien a Adam para casarse con una sobrina que no tenía un cuarto. ¿Qué habría sido Hetty, sino una criada, si su tío no se hubiese encargado de ella para criarla y para ayudar en los quehaceres domésticos su tía, cuya salud, después del nacimiento de Totty, no le permitía dedicarse a otra cosa que a vigilar a los niños y a los criados? Pero Hetty nunca alentó a Adam en lo más mínimo. Aun en los momentos en que estaba más persuadida de la superioridad de éste sobre los restantes admiradores, no pudo decidirse a aceptarle. Le gustaba advertir que aquel hombre hábil, fuerte y de firme mirada se hallaba en su poder. Y no hay duda de que se habría indignado si él diera la menor señal de librarse del yugo de su coqueta tiranía dedicándose a cortejar a la cariñosa Mary Burge, quien se habría sentido muy agradecida por la más mínima muestra de interés que él le diese. «¡Pobre Mary Burge! ¡Una muchacha tan pálida! Si se ponía una cinta encarnada parecía ser tan amarilla como la siempreviva, y en cuanto a su cabello, era liso como una madeja de hilo de algodón». Y cuando Adam pasaba unas cuantas semanas sin ir a Hall Farm, o mostraba de otro modo cierta resistencia a su pasión, considerándola una tontería, Hetty cuidaba de hacerle penetrar de nuevo en la red, valiéndose de algunas expresiones cariñosas y de su timidez, como si estuviese muy preocupada por su olvido. En cuanto a casarse con Adam, el asunto era muy diferente. Nada en el mundo podría tentarla a hacer semejante cosa. Sus mejillas no se sonrojaban en lo más mínimo cuando se pronunciaba el nombre del joven; no sentía ninguna emoción al verle pasar por delante de la ventana o aparecer inesperadamente en el sendero que cruzaba el prado. Nada sentía cuando notaba los ojos de Adam fijos en ella, excepción hecha del frío triunfo de saber que él la amaba y de que a Mary Burge ni siquiera la miraría. Adam no podía despertar en la joven las emociones que produce el dulce envenenamiento del primer amor, del mismo modo como el sol dibujado no es capaz de despertar la savia de la primavera en las sutiles fibras de la planta. Ella le veía tal como era en realidad: un hombre pobre que tenía que mantener a sus ancianos padres y que, durante mucho tiempo, no podría proporcionarle los mismos lujos y comodidades de que gozaba en casa de su tío. Y los sueños de Hetty se referían siempre al lujo: sentarse en una sala con una hermosa alfombra en el suelo y llevar siempre medias blancas; poseer unos bonitos pendientes largos a la moda; ponerse unos encajes de Nottingham en la parte superior del vestido y llevar un perfume en el pañuelo como había visto que llevaba la señorita Lydia Donnithorne cuando lo sacaba en la iglesia; y no verse obligada a levantarse temprano ni a sufrir las regañinas de nadie. Y se decía que si Adam hubiese sido rico y pudiese darle todas esas cosas, ella le amaría lo suficiente para casarse con él.

Pero durante las últimas semanas una nueva influencia se apoderó de Hetty; indefinida, etérea, se concretaba en esperanzas que ni siquiera la joven se atrevía a confesarse, pero que producían un efecto narcótico muy agradable y la obligaban a pisar y a ocuparse de su trabajo como en sueños, sin darse cuenta del peso ni del esfuerzo, y le mostraban todas las cosas a través de un velo suave y líquido, como si ya no viviese en este mundo sólido de ladrillos y de piedra, sino en otro beatífico, como el que el sol ilumina en el fondo de las aguas. Hetty se había dado cuenta de que últimamente el señor Arthur Donnithorne hacía todo lo posible para verla; que siempre se situaba en la iglesia de manera que pudiese contemplarla lo mejor posible, tanto cuando ella se sentaba como cuando se ponía en pie; que constantemente hallaba razones para visitar Hall Farm y que siempre lograba decir algo que a ella le obligase a contestarle y a mirarlo. La pobre muchacha no se atrevía aún a pensar que el joven caballero pudiese amarla, del mismo modo que la

hermosa hija del panadero que se halla entre la multitud y a quien el joven emperador distingue con una sonrisa imperial y admiradora tampoco concibe la posibilidad de llegar a ser emperatriz. Pero la hija del panadero vuelve a su casa y empieza a soñar con el guapo y joven emperador, y quizá se equivoca al pesar la harina, mientras piensa en lo dichosa que sería si pudiese conseguirlo como marido. Y así, la pobre Hetty se veía acompañada constantemente por un rostro y una figura que no la abandonaban ni dormida ni despierta; las miradas brillantes y suaves habían penetrado en su alma y dado a su vida una extraña y dichosa languidez. Los ojos que despedían tales miradas no eran, seguramente, tan hermosos como los de Adam, que a veces la contemplaban con triste y suplicante ternura, pero aun así habían hallado un ambiente propicio en la pequeña y tonta imaginación de Hetty, en tanto que los de Adam no podían penetrar en aquella atmósfera. Durante tres semanas, por lo menos, su vida interior consistió en poco más que en revivir mentalmente las miradas y las palabras que Arthur le había dirigido y en recordar las sensaciones que su voz le había producido en la parte exterior de la casa, o en rememorar cuando le vio entrar y tuvo la certeza de que sus ojos estaban fijos en ella y luego se dio cuenta de que una figura alta se inclinaba para mirarla con ojos que parecían tocarla y que se acercaba envuelta en ropas hermosas y con un aroma parecido al de las flores del jardín cuando sopla la brisa de la tarde. Eran unas ideas tontas e imprudentes, como se ve, y que nada tenían que ver con el amor que sienten en nuestros días las dulces jóvenes de dieciocho años. Pero eso ocurría, según recordará el lector, hace cosa de sesenta años y además es preciso tener en cuenta que Hetty carecía de instrucción, pues no era más que la hija de un modesto granjero, para quien un caballero de manos blancas era tan deslumbrante como un dios olímpico. Hasta ese día el futuro para Hetty no iba más allá de la próxima vez que el capitán Donnithorne visitara la granja, o del domingo siguiente, cuando le viera en la iglesia; pero entonces pensó que quizás él procuraría verla al día siguiente cuando ella se dirigiese al cazadero. Y hasta era posible que hablase con ella, o que la acompañase cuando nadie pudiera verlo. Esto último no había ocurrido aún; y ahora su imaginación, en vez de recordar el pasado, estaba muy ocupada en imaginarse lo que ocurriría al día siguiente, y se decía que una vez en el cazadero vería al capitán Donnithorne llegar en dirección a ella, que se habría puesto su lazo nuevo de color rosa, que él no le había visto todavía; y empezó a pensar lo que él le diría para obligarla a devolverle su mirada, mirada que quedaría fija en su memoria, por lo menos durante todo el resto del día.

En semejante estado mental, ¿cómo podía Hetty pensar siquiera en el disgusto que entonces sufría Adam o en que el pobre Mathias se había ahogado? Las almas jóvenes, cuando se hallan en un delirio tan agradable como el de Hetty, son tan egoístas e indiferentes como las mariposas que liban el néctar de las flores. Un muro de ensueños, unas miradas invisibles y unos brazos impalpables las aíslan de cualquier otra consideración.

Mientras las manos de Hetty se mantenían atareadas empaquetando la manteca, y en tanto su cabeza se veía ocupada completamente por las imágenes del día siguiente, Arthur Donnithorne, cabalgando al lado del señor Irwine en dirección al valle del arroyo del Sauce, también tenía presentimientos confusos en el fondo de su mente, al tiempo que escuchaba de labios del señor Irwine el relato de su conversación con Dinah. Y aquellos presentimientos imprecisos eran, sin embargo, lo bastante fuertes para que le sobresaltara oír la pregunta inesperada del señor Irwine:

—¿Qué le fascinó en la lechería de la señora Poyser, Arthur? ¿Se ha convertido en un aficionado de la industria lechera?

Arthur conocía demasiado bien al rector para imaginar que una mentira para salir del paso resultaría útil, y por eso, con su acostumbrada franqueza, replicó:

—No. Deseaba contemplar a la hermosa Hetty Sorrel. Es una Hebe perfecta, y si yo fuese artista la retrataría. Es sorprendente que haya tantas hermosas muchachas entre las hijas de los granjeros, cuando los hombres son tan torpes y desmañados. Entre éstos es corriente ver caras redondas, compuestas casi por entero de mejillas, sin otro tipo de facciones, como es el caso de Martin Poyser.

—No tengo ninguna objeción que hacer a que contemple a Hetty con ojos de artista; pero en cambio no debe alimentar su vanidad ni llenar su mollera con la idea de que es una belleza extraordinaria y atractiva para los caballeros distinguidos, porque, de lo contrario, la estropeará y no se resignará a ser la esposa de un pobre como, por ejemplo, el honrado Craig, a quien he visto lanzar miradas ardientes en dirección a la muchacha. Esa pequeñuela parece estar ya demasiado convencida de su valor para hacer desgraciado a su marido, como suele ocurrir siempre que un pobre hombre se casa con una belleza. Y, a propósito de matrimonio, espero que nuestro amigo Adam se casará pronto, ahora que el pobre viejo ha muerto. En lo venidero ya sólo tendrá que mantener a su anciana madre, y estoy persuadido de que hay algo entre él y esa agradable y modesta Mary Burge, a juzgar por lo que me dijo un día el viejo Jonathan. Pero cuando quise tratar del asunto con Adam, él se puso nervioso y cambió de conversación. Es posible que sus amoríos no

lleven muy buena marcha, o quizá Adam los aplace hasta gozar de mejor posición. Tiene una independencia espiritual bastante para dos hombres, aunque exceso de orgullo.

—Sería una boda magnífica para Adam. En el pellejo del viejo Burge, Adam haría grandes cosas para la construcción, estoy seguro. Me gustaría verle bien establecido en esta parroquia, pues así podría actuar de gran visir para mí, en cuanto yo lo necesitase. Juntos podríamos planear infinidad de reparaciones y de mejoras. En cuanto a la muchacha no creo haberla visto nunca… Por lo menos nunca la he mirado.

—Pues fíjese en ella el próximo domingo en la iglesia. Se sienta con su padre a la izquierda de la tarima. Sin embargo, estoy seguro de que no la contemplará tanto como a Hetty Sorrel. Cuando comprendo que no puedo comprar un perro que me interesa, no me fijo en él, porque si se encariñara conmigo y me mirase con ojos amorosos, la lucha entre la aritmética y la inclinación podría llegar a ser desagradable. Entonces apelo a mi sentido común, Arthur, y como a mí empieza a sobrarme la prudencia, se la concedo con mucho gusto.

—Muchas gracias. Es posible que algún día me sea útil, aunque, de momento, no tengo en qué utilizarla. ¡Caramba! ¡Cómo se ha desbordado el arroyo! ¿Qué le parece si avanzásemos al trote, ahora que hemos terminado ya el descenso de la colina?

Esta es la gran ventaja de un diálogo cuando se monta a caballo; en cualquier momento dado puede interrumpirse para emprender el trote o el galope, y en lo alto de una silla habría sido posible escapar incluso de Sócrates. Los dos amigos se vieron libres de la necesidad de seguir conversando hasta que entraron en el sendero que corría por detrás de la casa de Adam.

X

Dinah visita a Lisbeth

A las cinco de la tarde, Lisbeth bajó la escalera llevando una gran llave en la mano: era la de la estancia en que yacía el cadáver de su esposo. Durante todo el día, salvo en los accesos de dolor, la buena mujer había estado moviéndose sin cesar, cumpliendo los deberes para con el muerto con la solemnidad y exactitud propias de los ritos religiosos. Sacó su pequeña provisión de lienzo blanqueado al sol, guardado durante largos años para este uso supremo. Le parecía que fue ayer el día en que, muchos veranos atrás, dijo a Mathias dónde estaban los lienzos, a fin de que supiera con exactitud el lugar en que los encontraría en caso de morir ella, puesto que era la mayor de los dos. Luego limpió de toda impureza los objetos de la habitación sagrada y quitó las huellas de la ocupación diaria de la estancia. La ventanita que hasta entonces había dejado pasar libremente la helada luz de la luna o los primeros rayos del cálido sol, cuando aún dormía el viejo obrero, debía ser oscurecida con una tela blanca, porque aquel sueño era tan sagrado bajo las vigas desnudas como al amparo de los cielos rasos. Lisbeth remendó luego un antiguo y pequeño desgarrón en la punta de la colcha, que tenía unos dibujos a cuadros, pues era escaso y precioso el tiempo en que podría testimoniar su respeto y su amor por el cadáver, al que, en lo profundo de su pensamiento, atribuía cierta conciencia. Nuestros muertos no lo están por completo, para nosotros, hasta que los hemos olvidado. Podemos insultarlos y herirlos; ellos conocen nuestra penitencia y el dolor que nos causa ver vacío el lugar que antes ocupaban; y también ven los besos que damos a la más pequeña reliquia de su presencia. La anciana mujer campesina cree, más que nadie, que sus muertos saben todo eso. Durante sus muchos años de lucha por la vida, Lisbeth había pensado en el entierro decente que le harían, y esperaba poder presenciar, aun después de morir, cómo la llevaban al cementerio y su marido y sus hijos seguían su cadáver; y ahora se decía que lo más importante de su vida era procurar que Mathias fuese enterrado con decencia ante sus ojos, debajo del espino blanco donde en una ocasión y en sueños creyó verse a sí misma en el ataúd, contemplando el resplandor del sol en el exterior y percibiendo los aromas de las flores que tanto abundaban el domingo en que, inmediatamente después del nacimiento de Adam, fue a la iglesia.

Ahora ya había terminado todo lo que podía hacer en la cámara mortuoria; todo lo llevó a cabo sola, con el único auxilio de sus hijos para levantar las cosas pesadas, pues no quería pedir ayuda a nadie del pueblo ya que no le gustaban mucho sus vecinas, y su amiga Dolly, la vieja ama de llaves de casa de maese Burge, que había acudido a darle el pésame aquella misma mañana, en cuanto se enteró de la muerte de Mathias, estaba casi ciega, y de poca utilidad podía serle. Cerró la puerta de la estancia y empuñando la llave se dejó caer fatigada en una silla que se hallaba fuera de su sitio, en el centro de la estancia, y donde en circunstancias normales no habría querido sentarse. La cocina no recibió aquel día ninguna de sus atenciones; la ensuciaron muchos pies llenos de barro y además estaba desordenada a causa de las ropas y de otros objetos fuera de lugar. Pero lo que en otra ocasión habría sido intolerable para los hábitos de orden y limpieza de Lisbeth, le parecía ahora muy apropiado; convenía que todo tuviese un aspecto extraño y desordenado, en vista de que el anciano había hallado su fin de forma tan triste. La cocina no debía tener, por consiguiente, el aspecto de que no había ocurrido nada. Adam, agotado por la agitación y por las cosas que había tenido que hacer aquel día, después de una noche de trabajo duro, se quedó dormido sobre un banco del taller; y Seth, que se hallaba en la parte trasera de la cocina, encendió un fuego de astillas para poner a hervir agua y persuadir a su madre de que tomase una taza de té, satisfacción que se permitía muy pocas veces.

En la cocina no había nadie cuando Lisbeth entró y se dejó caer en una silla. Miró a su alrededor casi sin

ver y apenas se fijó en el polvo y en la confusión que alumbraba melancólicamente el brillante sol de la tarde. En su mente todo le parecía triste y confuso, como suele ocurrir en las primeras horas siguientes a un dolor repentino, cuando la pobre alma humana se parece a un hombre a quien hubiesen dejado durmiendo entre las ruinas de una enorme ciudad y se despierta con asombro y temor a un tiempo, sin saber si el día nace o está muriendo, e ignorando por qué y cuál fue la causa de aquella escena de desolación o la razón de verse a sí mismo abandonado en el centro de aquel terrible lugar.

En otra ocasión, la primera idea de Lisbeth habría sido preguntarse dónde estaba Adam; pero la muerte inesperada de su marido lo devolvió, en aquellas primeras horas, al lugar que en sus afectos ocupara veintiséis años atrás. La pobre anciana olvidó las faltas del difunto, del mismo modo como olvidamos las tristezas de nuestra pasada infancia, y no pensó en nada más que en la bondad de su marido cuando era joven y en la paciencia de su ancianidad. Sus ojos continuaron mirando de un lado a otro, hasta que entró Seth y empezó a quitar alguna de las cosas desparramadas por allí y a desocupar la pequeña y redonda mesa con objeto de servir el té.

—¿Qué haces? —preguntó ella con cierta sequedad.

—Quiero que tomes una taza de té, madre —contestó Seth con acento tierno—. Te hará mucho bien; mientras tanto quitaré algunas de estas cosas para que la casa tenga mejor aspecto.

—¿Mejor aspecto? ¿Para qué? ¿Cómo puedes pensar en eso? Déjalo. Para mí ya no hay consuelo —exclamó, mientras las lágrimas iban asomando a sus ojos—. Ahora ha muerto tu pobre padre, para quien durante treinta años guisé, lavé y remendé, porque él siempre recibía con agrado cuanto yo le hiciera, y además era muy hábil en hacer los trabajos de la casa cuando yo estaba enferma, y hasta subía orgulloso la escalera para servirme; y luego, por espacio de ocho kilómetros, llevó en brazos a nuestro hijo, que pesaba como dos, sin gruñir hasta llegar a Wartson Wake, cuando yo quise ir a ver a mi hermana, que murió la Navidad siguiente. Y el pobre se ha ahogado en el arroyo que atravesamos el día de nuestra boda, al venir juntos a casa; me había construido infinitos estantes para poner los platos y la vajilla, y me mostraba su trabajo con gran orgullo, pues sabía que a mí gustaría. Y, sin embargo, el pobre estaba condenado a morir sin que yo lo supiera, mientras dormía tranquilamente en mi cama y como si nada me importase su suerte. ¡Desgraciada de mí, que he vivido para ver eso! Ahora déjame, hijo mío. No quiero té. Y poco me importa comer y beber en adelante. Cuando se hunde el extremo de un puente, ¿qué importa que el otro siga conservando su solidez? Mejor sería que me muriese para ir con mi hombre. Estoy segura de que me necesita.

Entonces Lisbeth dejó de hablar y empezó a gemir, meciéndose al mismo tiempo en la silla. Seth, siempre tímido con su madre, y convencido de que no tenía ninguna influencia sobre ella, comprendió que sería inútil tratar de calmarla hasta que le hubiese pasado el acceso de dolor. Por eso se limitó a cuidar el fuego de la cocina y a doblar la ropa de su padre, que desde la mañana estaba colgada para que se secase; temía moverse demasiado en presencia de su madre y despertar su irritación.

En cuanto Lisbeth hubo llorado durante unos minutos, se interrumpió de pronto y dijo:

—Voy a ver a Adam, que no sé dónde ha ido. Quiero que suba conmigo la escalera antes de que anochezca, pues ya queda poco tiempo para contemplar el cadáver, Seth oyó estas palabras y, acercándose a su madre en el momento en que ésta se ponía en pie, le dijo:

—Adam está dormido en el taller, madre. Mejor sería no despertarlo, porque el pobre estaba muy fatigado a consecuencia del trabajo y de las preocupaciones.

—¿Despertarle? ¿Quién va a despertarle? Supongo que no le despertaré si voy a mirarle. Hace ya dos horas que no le veo, y hasta había olvidado casi que ha crecido y ya no es el niño que su padre llevaba en brazos.

Adam estaba sentado en un banco basto y tenía la cabeza apoyada en el brazo que descansaba en el largo banco de carpintero que se hallaba en el centro del taller. Al parecer se había sentado para descansar unos minutos y se quedó dormido, sin abandonar su expresión de preocupación triste y fatigada. Su rostro, que no había lavado desde el día anterior, estaba pálido y sucio. Tenía el cabello revuelto sobre la frente y los ojos parecían hundidos a consecuencia de la ansiedad y de la pena. Sus cejas estaban fruncidas y en todo el semblante se advertía una expresión de cansancio y de tristeza. Gyp estaba visiblemente inquieto, porque se había sentado sobre su cuarto trasero y apoyaba el hocico en la extendida pierna de su amo. Y, alternativamente, lamía la mano que colgaba inerte y miraba con atención hacia la puerta. El pobre perro estaba hambriento y nervioso, pero no quería abandonar a su amo, aunque esperaba impacientemente un cambio en la escena. Así pues, cuando Lisbeth entró en el taller y se acercó a Adam con gran sigilo, enseguida fracasó su primera intención de no despertarle, pues la excitación de Gyp era demasiado grande para no proferir un corto ladrido. Adam abrió los ojos y vio a su madre de pie ante él. Ello no era muy

distinto de lo que estaba soñando, pues mientras dormía había vuelto a vivir de un modo febril todo lo ocurrido desde que salió el sol, y en aquellas escenas siempre estaba presente su madre, agobiada por el dolor. La diferencia principal entre la realidad y la visión era que en su sueño Hetty se le aparecía constantemente, tomando parte como actriz en escenas en las que no tenía ninguna intervención. Hetty se hallaba junto al arroyo del Sauce y hacía enfadar a su madre entrando en la casa; y luego la encontraba con su hermoso trajecito mojado mientras recorría el camino bajo la lluvia para ir a Treddleston a avisar al coronen Pero siempre que aparecía Hetty era seguro que no tardaría en presentarse su madre; así que al abrir los ojos no le sorprendió verla a su lado.

—Hijo mío —exclamó inmediatamente Lisbeth, sintiendo de nuevo el impulso de echarse a llorar, pues el dolor reciente experimenta la necesidad de asociar la pérdida y el lamento con cualquier cambio de escena—. Ahora ya no tienes más que a tu vieja madre para que te atormente y sea una carga para ti. Tu pobre padre no te hará enojar nunca más y tu madre pronto irá a reunirse con él y ¡ojalá sea cuanto antes, porque ahora ya no soy buena para nadie! Una chaqueta vieja sirve para remendar otra, para nada más. Deberías casarte; tu mujer te remendará la ropa y te preparará la comida, en vez de tu anciana madre. ¡Yo no seré más que un estorbo sentada junto a la chimenea!

Adam empezó a agitarse inquieto, pues sobre todas las cosas, temía que su madre empezase a hablar de Hetty.

—Pero si tu padre viviera aún, jamás me iría para dejar el sitio libre a otra mujer, ya que él no habría sabido vivir sin mí, igual que una hoja de tijera no sirve de nada sin su compañera. Deberíamos haber muerto los dos a la vez, y así yo no habría visto este día, y un solo entierro habría bastado.

Lisbeth hizo una pausa, pero Adam continuó sentado y sumido en un doloroso silencio. Aquel día le era imposible hablar con dureza a su madre, pero no por eso dejaban de irritarle sus quejas. La pobre Lisbeth no se daba cuenta de lo que le molestaba, igual que el perro herido no comprende que sus aullidos afectan los nervios de su amo. Como todas las mujeres quejumbrosas, se lamentaba con la esperanza de que la tranquilizasen, y al ver que Adam no decía nada, sintió deseos renovados de seguir quejándose con amargura.

—Comprendo que tú estarás mejor sin mí, porque así podrás ir donde quieras y casarte con quien te apetezca. Desde luego, yo no te diré nada; puedes traer a casa a quien quieras. Jamás abriré los labios para encontrar faltas en tu mujer, porque cuando las personas envejecen ya no sirven para nada y pueden estar contentas si tienen un bocado y un plato de sopa que llevarse a la boca sin que nadie les dirija malas palabras. Y si estás enamorado de alguna muchacha, aunque sea una malgastadora y no te traiga ninguna dote, cásate con ella, que yo no me opondré, ahora que tu padre está muerto y ahogado, porque ya no soy nadie ni valgo nada sin mi pobre marido.

Incapaz de seguir soportando aquello, Adam se levantó en silencio y salió del taller para dirigirse a la cocina. Pero Lisbeth le siguió:

—¿No quieres ir arriba a ver a tu padre? He terminado ya mi trabajo y me gustaría que fueses a verle, pues ya sabes que el pobrecillo estaba muy contento cuando le ponías buena cara.

Adam se volvió de pronto y dijo:

—Sí, madre. Vamos arriba. Ven, Seth, acompáñanos.

Subieron la escalera y durante cinco minutos reinó el silencio. Luego dieron de nuevo vuelta a la llave y resonaron pasos en la escalera. Pero Adam no volvió a bajar, pues estaba demasiado fatigado para soportar por más tiempo las quejas de su madre y se fue a descansar a su propia cama. En cuanto Lisbeth entró en la cocina y se sentó, se cubrió la cabeza con el delantal y empezó a sollozar, a gemir y a mecerse como antes. Seth pensó: «Ahora que ya hemos ido a ver el cadáver de padre, poco a poco se irá tranquilizando». Y volvió a cuidar del fuego en la parte trasera de la cocina, esperando que lograría convencerla de que tomase una taza de té.

Durante al menos cinco minutos, Lisbeth estuvo meciéndose y profiriendo un ahogado gemido con cada movimiento; de pronto sintió una mano que le estrechaba las suyas con cariño y oyó una voz dulce y suave que decía:

—Hermana, el Señor me ha enviado para ver si puedo consolarla.

Lisbeth se detuvo para escuchar, aunque sin quitarse el delantal que le cubría la cabeza. Aquella voz le era desconocida. ¿Sería el espíritu de su hermana que, después de tanto años, volvía a su lado de entre los muertos?

Tembló y no se atrevió a mirar.

Creyendo Dinah que aquella pausa de extrañeza era un alivio en el dolor de la mujer, no dijo nada más y se limitó a quitarse el gorro. Luego, indicando a Seth con un gesto que guardase silencio, ya que el joven, al

oír su voz, había acudido con el corazón palpitante, puso una mano sobre el respaldo de la silla de Lisbeth y se inclinó sobre ella para que advirtiese su amistosa presencia.

Lentamente Lisbeth separó el delantal y abrió sus ojos oscuros y turbios con timidez. Al principio no vio más que un rostro, un semblante pálido y puro animado por dos ojos grises y cariñosos completamente desconocidos para ella. Muy extrañada, creyó por un momento que quizá fuera un ángel. Pero cuando Dinah posó la mano en Lisbeth, la anciana la miró. Era una mano mucho más pequeña que la suya, pero no blanca ni delicada, pues Dinah no había llevado guantes en toda su vida y en ella se advertían las huellas del trabajo al que la joven se había dedicado desde la infancia. Lisbeth miró aquella mano con gran fijeza, y luego, dirigiendo otra vez los ojos al rostro de Dinah con más valor, exclamó sorprendida:

—¡Cómo! ¿Es una obrera?

—Sí. Soy Dinah Morris y trabajo en la fábrica de hilados cuando vivo en mi casa.

—¡Ah! —exclamó Lisbeth aún extrañada—. Ha llegado con tanto silencio como si fuera una sombra y ha hablado en mi oído como si fuera un espíritu. Se parece mucho a una figura sentada que aparece en la nueva Biblia de Adam.

—Vengo de Hall Farm. Ya conoce a la señora Poyser. Es mi tía, que se ha enterado de su dolor y lo siente mucho. Yo he venido con objeto de consolarla un poco en su aflicción. Conozco a sus hijos Adam y Seth; sé que no tiene ninguna hija, y cuando el clérigo me ha contado que la mano de Dios se había apoyado pesadamente en usted, sentí el deseo de venir para ocupar en estos momentos dolorosos el lugar de la hija que no tiene, siempre que consienta en ello.

—Ahora ya sé quién es usted; es metodista, como Seth. Ya me ha hablado de usted —replicó Lisbeth algo enfadada pues, una vez desaparecida su extrañeza, volvía a sentirse dominada por la pena—. Estoy segura de que quiere demostrarme que el dolor es algo conveniente, como siempre me predica Seth. ¿Mas para qué sirve hablarme de eso? No puede mitigar mi pena con sus palabras y jamás me convencerá de que no habría sido mejor que mi viejo marido hubiese muerto en cama cuando le llegara la hora, acompañado del sacerdote. Yo le habría podido decir que no se preocupara por las malas palabras que le dirigí enfadada, y además le habría dado de comer y de beber mientras él pudiera hacerlo. ¡Pero morir en el agua fría, junto a la casa, y sin que nosotros lo supiéramos…, mientras yo dormía apaciblemente, como si jamás le hubiese pertenecido y él fuese un vagabundo que no importase a nadie!

Dicho esto, Lisbeth empezó a llorar y a mecerse de nuevo.

—Sí, querida amiga, su dolor es muy grande. Y daría pruebas de tener el corazón muy duro quien le dijera que su pena no debe ser inmensa. Dios no me ha enviado con objeto de mitigar su tristeza, sino para llorar con usted, suponiendo que quiera permitírmelo. Si tuviera preparado un gran festín y se divirtiera en compañía de sus amigos, le parecería un acto de bondad dejarme sentar y regocijarme con usted, porque creería que me sería agradable gozar de tan buenas cosas; pero yo quiero hoy compartir su dolor y su pena, y me sería muy duro que me negarais este favor. ¿Quiere que me quede? ¿No le molesta que haya venido?

—Nada de eso. ¿Quién le ha dicho que estoy enfadada? Ha sido muy buena al venir. Oye, Seth; dale un poco de té. Mucha prisa tenías en hacérmelo tomar cuando yo no lo quería; en cambio, no te preocupas de prepararlo en el momento necesario. Pero, siéntese, siéntese. Es muy buena por haber venido, pues resulta muy desagradable atravesar a pie los campos mojados para venir a ver a una vieja como yo. No, no he tenido ninguna hija, y la verdad es que hasta ahora no lo sentí, porque las muchachas son muy caprichosas y hay que vigilarlas; siempre quise tener hijos, capaces de bastarse a sí mismos. Y como, por otra parte, los muchachos se casan luego, ya llegará la ocasión de tener hijas, y aun más de las que quisiera. Ahora prepárese el té como más le guste, pues hoy no tengo paladar para ocuparme de estas cosas. Todo lo que trago me parece tener el mismo sabor y todo me resulta doloroso.

Dinah se cuidó de dar a entender que ya había tomado el té y aceptó enseguida la invitación de Lisbeth, con objeto de lograr que la anciana comiese y bebiese, pues lo necesitaba después de un día de ayuno y de trabajo duro.

Seth estaba tan feliz de ver a Dinah que no pudo menos que pensar que valía la pena comprar su presencia con una vida en que el dolor siguiera incesantemente al dolor, pero inmediatamente se censuró a sí mismo, pues parecía como si se alegrase de la triste muerte de su padre. Sin embargo, la felicidad de estar con Dinah acabó triunfando. Era como la influencia del clima, que ninguna resistencia puede vencer. Y sus sentimientos se exteriorizaron de tal modo en su rostro, que incluso llamaron la atención de su madre.

—Ya veo que continúas pensando que el dolor es algo bueno, Seth, pues estoy segura de que te alegras. Parece como si no te dieras cuenta de nada, igual que cuando eras pequeño y estabas en la cuna despierto. Permanecías con los ojos abiertos, mientras que Adam siempre quería que lo sacasen en cuanto los abría. Tú no eras más que un montón de carne, y jamás te preocupabas por nada, aunque tu pobre padre era muy

distinto. Pero mira del mismo modo que él —añadió Lisbeth volviéndose a Dinah—. Tal vez se deba a que es metodista. No le censuro por ello, pues aun cuando esta desgracia no le toca de cerca, parece estar realmente apenada. Si los metodistas buscan el dolor, no les faltará seguramente, y es una lástima que no puedan quitarlo a las personas a quienes no les gusta. Yo podría haberles dado tanto cuanto quisieran, pues cuando aún vivía mi pobre marido estaba angustiada de la mañana a la noche, y ahora, que ya lo he perdido, me alegraría de volver a tenerlo a mi lado, aunque fuera en los momentos en que más me hacía sufrir.

—Sí —replicó Dinah cuidando de no contener ninguna de las quejas de Lisbeth, pues confiaba en sus más leves palabras y gestos, dotados de la dirección divina, y resultado de una compasión sincera e intensa —. Sí, recuerdo que cuando murió mi querida tía deseé incluso oír su horrible tos todas las noches, en lugar del silencio al que me condujo su muerte. Y ahora, querida amiga, tómese otra taza de té y coma un poco más.

—¡Cómo! —exclamó Lisbeth tomando la taza y hablando con un tono menos quejumbroso—. ¿De modo que es huérfana de padre y madre, y le causó tanto dolor la muerte de su tía?

—No conocí a mis padres, y mi tía, que no tenía hijos, me crió, y me dio tanto amor y ternura como si hubiese sido mi propia madre.

—Bastante hizo la pobre criándola desde la primera infancia sola. Pero estoy segura de que debía usted de ser muy buena, pues no tiene cara de haberse enfadado en toda la vida. ¿Y qué hizo usted al morir su tía, y por qué no vino a vivir aquí, siendo como es sobrina de la señora Poyser?

Al ver que había despertado la atención de Lisbeth, Dinah le refirió su historia desde sus primeros años y le contó cómo su tía la crió trabajando duro, y cómo era Snowfield, ciudad donde la vida resultaba muy difícil, y también le contó todos los detalles que podían interesarle. Mientras escuchaba, la anciana olvidó su enfado y su dolor, prendida como estaba, inconscientemente, de la influencia sedante del rostro y de la voz de Dinah. Poco después se dejó convencer de que había que limpiar la cocina, pues Dinah comprendió que el orden contribuiría a inclinar a Lisbeth a tomar parte en la oración que deseaba pronunciar junto a ella. Mientras tanto Seth, adivinando que la joven quería quedarse a solas con su madre, salió a partir leña.

Lisbeth la observaba mientras Dinah iba de un lado a otro y trabajaba apacible pero rápidamente.

—Veo que sabe lo que es orden y limpieza. Ya me gustaría tenerla por hija, y estoy segura de que no gastaría el dinero de mi hijo en trajes y caprichos. No se parece en nada a las muchachas de por aquí. No hay duda de que la gente de Snowfield es muy diferente.

—La mayoría llevan una vida distinta —contestó Dinah—. Trabajan en diferentes cosas; algunos en la fábrica, muchos en las minas o en las poblaciones inmediatas. Pero en todas partes es igual el corazón del hombre, y tanto aquí como allí existen los hijos de este mundo y los hijos de la luz. En cambio, tenemos allí más metodistas que aquí.

—No sabía que las mujeres metodistas fuesen como usted, pues la esposa de Will Maskery, que, según creo, es una gran metodista, tiene un aspecto muy desagradable. Por mi parte preferiría mirar a un sapo que a ella. Le agradecería mucho que se quedara a dormir, pues mañana me encantaría encontrarla aquí. Aunque tal vez le estarán aguardando en casa de maese Poyser.

—No —contestó Dinah—, no me esperan, y, si me lo permite, me gustaría mucho quedarme.

—Tenemos bastante sitio. Hay una cama hecha en el cuartito inmediato a la cocina, así podría dormir junto a mí. Me gustaría mucho oírla hablar durante la noche, pues lo hace de un modo muy agradable. Sus palabras me recuerdan el parloteo de las golondrinas que había el año pasado bajo el alero del tejado, cuando empezaban a cantar suavemente al amanecer. Mi pobre marido quería mucho a esos pájaros, igual que Adam. Pero este año no han vuelto. Quizás hayan muerto también.

—Bueno —dijo Dinah—. Ya está limpia la cocina, y ahora, querida madre, puesto que esta noche seré su hija, quisiera que se lavase la cara y se pusiera un gorro limpio. ¿Recuerda lo que hizo David cuando Dios le quitó a su hijo? Mientras el niño estaba vivo, el rey ayunó y rogó a Dios que se lo conservara, y no quiso comer ni beber, sino que permaneció toda la noche tendido en el suelo, rezando a Dios por su hijo. Pero al saber que había muerto se puso de pie, se lavó y se ungió, cambió de traje, comió y bebió. Y cuando le preguntaron cómo era que había olvidado el dolor, a pesar de estar muerto su hijo, contestó: «Cuando el niño vivía aún, ayuné y lloré, porque decía: "¿Quién sabe si Dios será misericordioso conmigo y me concederá la vida de mi hijo?". Pero ahora que ya ha muerto, ¿para qué ayunar si no puedo devolverle la vida? Yo puedo ir a reunirme con él; pero él, en cambio, no volverá a mi lado».

—Eso sí que es verdad —replicó Lisbeth—. En efecto, mi pobre marido no volverá a mi lado, aunque yo puedo ir a reunirme con él… Y cuanto antes, mejor. En fin, haré lo que quiera. En ese cajón hay un gorro limpio y ahora iré a la cocina a lavarme la cara. Mientras tanto, Seth, podrías buscar la Biblia nueva de

Adam, aquella que tiene dibujos, y Dinah nos leerá un capítulo. ¡Oh, me gustan mucho estas palabras: «Yo puedo ir a reunirme con él; pero él, en cambio, no volverá a mi lado»!

Dinah y Seth daban mentalmente gracias a Dios por el consuelo que, al parecer, había recibido Lisbeth. Era precisamente lo que Dinah buscaba, valiéndose de su simpatía y absteniéndose de cualquier tipo de exhortación. Desde su infancia no había dejado de tener continuas experiencias entre los enfermos y los dolientes, entre las gentes endurecidas y encallecidas por la pobreza y por la ignorancia, y había adquirido una percepción sutil sobre el mejor modo de conmoverles o consolarles y suavizar sus sentimientos para que recibiesen con gusto palabras de consuelo o ayuda espiritual. Y, como ella misma decía, «Nunca se sintió abandonada, sino que siempre recibió ayuda para saber cuándo debía guardar silencio y cuando podía hablar». ¿No convenimos todos en llamar inspiración al pensamiento rápido y al impulso noble? Después de nuestro análisis más sutil del proceso mental, hemos de decir, como lo hizo Dinah, que nuestros pensamientos más elevados y nuestras mejores acciones nos han sido dados.

Y así, en la pequeña cocina hubo aquella tarde sinceras oraciones, fe, amor y esperanza. Y la pobre anciana y dolorida Lisbeth, sin comprender claramente ninguna idea y sin sentir ninguna emoción religiosa, tuvo una vaga sensación de la bondad, del amor y de algo justo y conveniente que se hallaba debajo y más allá de su dolorosa vida. No podía comprender el dolor, pero en aquellos momentos y bajo la suave influencia del espíritu de Dinah, se dijo que debía ser paciente y estar tranquila.

XI

En la casita

A las cuatro y media de la mañana siguiente, Dinah, harta de estar despierta en la cama y de escuchar a los pájaros, y observando que aumentaba la luz que atravesaba la ventanita de la buhardilla, se levantó y empezó a vestirse sin hacer ruido para no despertar a Lisbeth. Pero en la casa alguien se movía ya y bajaba la escalera precedido por Gyp. Los pasos del perro indicaban que quien estaba levantado era Adam y que se había dirigido a la planta baja; pero Dinah se figuró que sería Seth, pues le habían contado que Adam había pasado toda la noche anterior trabajando y sin dormir. Por su parte, Seth se despertó al oír cómo se abría la puerta. La excitación del día anterior, aumentada por la inesperada presencia de Dinah, no había sido contrarrestada por ningún cansancio físico, pues no había trabajado como de costumbre, y así, al acostarse, sólo pudo cerrar los ojos después de varias horas de nerviosismo, y se despertó más tarde de lo acostumbrado.

En cambio Adam había dormido profundamente, y con su habitual impaciencia y su poco gusto por el ocio, se disponía a empezar el nuevo día y a vencer la tristeza a fuerza de voluntad y de trabajo vigoroso. El valle se veía cubierto por la niebla y el día se anunciaba brillante y caluroso; Adam se disponía a reanudar el trabajo en cuanto hubiese desayunado. «Mientras un hombre pueda trabajar, no hay nada insoportable —se dijo—. No cambia la naturaleza de las cosas, aunque parece como si la propia vida no fuese más que una sucesión de cambios. El cuadrado de cuatro es dieciséis y se puede alargar la palanca en proporción con el peso de uno mismo; eso es tan verdad si un hombre es feliz como si se siente desgraciado; y lo mejor del trabajo es que le obliga a uno a fijarse en cosas que nada tienen que ver con la situación en que se encuentra».

Mientras derramaba agua fresca sobre su cabeza, se sintió de nuevo dueño de sí mismo; sus ojos negros brillaban con la misma agudeza que de costumbre y hacían juego con su espeso cabello oscuro y reluciente a causa de la humedad. Entró en el taller en busca de la madera destinada al ataúd de su padre con intención de llevarla, en compañía de Seth, al taller de Jonathan Burge para que uno de los obreros hiciese el féretro y su madre no presenciase la operación en su propia casa.

Apenas había entrado en el taller cuando su oído percibió un rápido y ligero paso en la escalera que, sin duda, no pertenecía a su madre. Cuando el día anterior había llegado Dinah, él ya estaba acostado, así que se preguntó a quién podían pertenecer aquellos pasos. Se le ocurrió una idea insensata que le emocionó intensamente. ¿Y si fuese Hetty? Desde luego era la última persona a quien podía imaginar en su casa. No se atrevió a averiguarlo por sus propios ojos y tener la prueba clara y evidente de que era otra persona. Se quedó apoyado en un tablón de madera, escuchando los sonidos que su imaginación interpretaba de forma tan agradable, y su enérgico rostro expresó una tímida ternura. Los ligeros pasos se movieron por la cocina, y luego se oyó el roce de la escoba contra el suelo, con un ruido apenas mayor que la leve brisa que hace correr las hojas de otoño por el polvoriento sendero. Y Adam vio en su imaginación un rostro cubierto de hoyuelos, iluminado por unos ojos brillantes y oscuros, sonriendo traviesamente, y una figura armoniosa que se inclinaba para coger el palo de la escoba. Era una tontería, pues aquélla no podía ser Hetty. El único modo de sacarse de la cabeza aquella idea era ir a ver quién estaba en la cocina, pues su fantasía se inclinaba cada vez al engaño mientras permanecía allí de pie y con el oído atento. Así, soltó el tablón y se acercó a la puerta de la cocina.

—¿Cómo está, Adam Bede? —preguntó Dinah con voz apacible, interrumpiendo su barrido y fijando en él su mirada suave y grave—. Espero que habrá descansado y se sentirá con fuerzas para soportar el calor

del día que se anuncia.

Aquello era como soñar con la luz del sol y despertarse a la de la luna. Adam había visto varias veces a Dinah, pero siempre en Hall Farm, donde apenas se daba cuenta de ninguna presencia femenina exceptuando la de Hetty, y sólo hacía uno o dos días que había empezado a sospechar que su hermano Seth estaba enamorado de ella, de modo que no había querido fijarse en la joven por consideración a su hermano. Pero ahora, la figura esbelta, el traje sencillo y negro y el rostro pálido y sereno de Dinah le impresionaron con toda la fuerza que tiene una realidad junto a una fantasía. Por un momento no contestó, sino que la miró con la expresión concentrada y escrutadora que el hombre dirige al objeto que repentinamente empieza a interesarle. Dinah, por vez primera en su vida, sintió una dolorosa conciencia de sí misma; en la penetrante mirada de aquel hombre había algo muy distinto de la suavidad y timidez de su hermano Seth. Se sonrojó un poco, y cuando lo notó, se sonrojó todavía más. Y eso dio a entender a Adam la inconveniencia de su ensimismamiento.

—Me ha sorprendido —dijo—; le agradezco mucho su bondad por haber venido a visitar a mi madre en su dolor —añadió con tono cariñoso y lleno de gratitud, pues enseguida dedujo el objeto de la presencia de la joven—. Espero que mi madre le habrá agradecido su visita —dijo, preguntándose no sin cierta inquietud cuál habría sido la acogida que había dispensado a la joven.

—Sí —contestó Dinah reanudando su trabajo—. Después de un rato pareció reconfortada, y esta noche ha descansado muy bien. Cuando la he dejado, estaba profundamente dormida.

—¿Quién llevó la noticia a Hall Farm? —preguntó Adam mientras sus pensamientos se fijaban en uno de los habitantes de aquella casa, y se preguntaba si *ella* se habría apenado por lo ocurrido.

—Me lo dijo el señor Irwine, el clérigo, y mi tía se compadeció tanto de su madre al saberlo que deseó que yo viniese. Estoy segura de que también mi tío lo habrá sentido mucho al enterarse, pero durante todo el día de ayer estuvo en Rosseter. Estoy convencida de que todos esperan su visita cuando pueda ir por allá, pues es usted siempre bien venido en Hall Farm.

Gracias a sus dotes de adivinación, Dinah sabía que Adam deseaba enterarse de si Hetty había dicho algo acerca de su desgracia. Pero la joven era demasiado sincera para mentir, aun con buena intención, y así, se las había ingeniado para decir algo que comprendiese tácitamente a Hetty. El amor tiene la costumbre de engañarse a sí mismo de un modo consciente, como un niño que juega al escondite solo. Se complace con seguridades que, al mismo tiempo, se niega a creer. Adam se sintió tan contento por lo que Dinah acababa de decir que, de momento, no pensó en nada más que en la próxima visita que haría a Hall Farm, esperando que entonces Hetty le trataría con más benevolencia que en otras ocasiones.

—Y usted, ¿no se quedará por aquí? —preguntó a Dinah.

—No. El sábado regreso a Snowfield y tengo que salir temprano hacia Treddleston, a fin de llegar a tiempo para tomar el carro que va a Oakbourne. Por esta razón me veo obligada a regresar esta noche a la granja, así podré pasar el último día en compañía de mi tía y de sus hijos. Pero en caso de que su madre lo desee, hoy puedo quedarme; ayer pareció que su corazón me cobraba cierto afecto.

—En tal caso, también querrá que se quede hoy. Cuando madre se aficiona a una persona a primera vista, es indudable que llega a cobrarle cariño; pero es curioso pues, por regla general, no le gustan las mujeres jóvenes. No obstante —añadió Adam sonriendo—, eso no es razón para que no le sea simpática.

Hasta entonces Gyp había asistido en silencio a esta conversación, sentado sobre su cuarto trasero y observando el rostro de su amo y los movimientos de Dinah por la cocina alternativamente. La bondadosa sonrisa con que Adam pronunció estas últimas palabras debió de parecer decisiva a Gyp con respecto a la acogida que se reservaba a la joven, pues cuando ella se volvió tras dejar la escoba en un rincón, trotó hacia ella y apoyó el hocico en su mano de un modo amistoso.

—Ya ve que Gyp le da la bienvenida —dijo Adam—. Y tenga en cuenta que le cuesta bastante admitir a los desconocidos.

—¡Pobre perro! —dijo Dinah acariciando el áspero pelaje gris—. Los pobres seres mudos me dan la sensación de que desean hablar, pero que hay alguna razón desconocida que se lo impide. Siempre me dan lástima los perros, aunque quizás no sea necesario. Es posible, sin embargo, que sientan más de lo que pueden darnos a entender, si pensamos que nosotros mismos apenas podemos expresar la mitad de lo que sentimos.

Seth bajó entonces y le complació encontrar a Adam hablando con Dinah, pues deseaba que su hermano se convenciese de lo mucho mejor que era esa mujer comparada con las demás. Pero después de algunas palabras amables, Adam volvió a meterse en el taller para hacer cálculos con relación al ataúd y Dinah continuó su limpieza.

A las seis de la mañana se sentaban todos a desayunar en compañía de Lisbeth, en una cocina tan limpia

como ella misma podía haberla dejado. La ventana y la puerta estaban abiertas y el aire de la mañana traía el aroma del tomillo y de los rosales silvestres del jardincito que había a un lado de la casa. Al principio Dinah no se sentó, y sirvió de pie el potaje caliente y la torta de avena tostada que había preparado según la costumbre de aquella casa después de preguntar a Seth qué les daba su madre cada mañana. Lisbeth había guardado silencio desde que bajó la escalera; al parecer, necesitaba algún tiempo para ajustar sus ideas al estado actual de las cosas. Le parecía ser una gran señora que bajaba de su habitación para encontrarse todo el trabajo listo y para sentarse luego y ser servida. Sus nuevas sensaciones parecieron alejar el recuerdo de su dolor. Por fin, después de probar el potaje, dijo:

—Pero ¿cómo ha podido hacer el potaje? Puedo comerlo sin que se me revuelva el estómago. Estaría mejor un poco más espeso; además yo le pongo unas hojas de menta. De todos modos, usted no podía saberlo. Mis hijos son incapaces de hacerse el potaje solos, de modo que han tenido suerte de que usted se ocupase de él. Y debo admitir que es una joven muy trabajadora y que ha limpiado perfectamente la casa.

—¡Ya lo creo! —exclamó Adam—. A mi juicio no podría estar mejor.

—Tú no entiendes de eso. Los hombres jamás saben si se ha fregado el suelo o si el gato lo ha lamido. Lo único que detectáis es cuándo se quema un guiso. Yo no os lo doy nunca quemado, y si quisierais, comprenderíais que vuestra madre todavía sirve para algo.

—Dinah —dijo Seth—, haga el favor de sentarse y desayunar. Ya estamos todos servidos.

—Sí, siéntese —exclamó Lisbeth—. Y coma. Bien que lo necesitará después de trabajar tanto. Venga —añadió en tono de quejumbroso afecto cuando Dinah se sentaba a su lado—. Sentiré mucho que se marche; ya veo que no podrá quedarse por más tiempo. Prefiero estar sola con usted esta tarde que en compañía de mucha gente.

—Si quiere me quedaré esta noche —dijo Dinah—. No tendría inconveniente en permanecer más en su casa, pero el caso es que el sábado vuelvo a Snowfield y debo pasar todo el día de mañana en compañía de mi tía.

—No vuelva allá… Mi marido nació en la región de Stonyshire, pero salió de allí en su juventud, e hizo bien, porque, según decía, allí no había madera y, por consiguiente, era un lugar muy malo para un carpintero.

—¡Ah! —exclamó Adam—. Recuerdo que cuando yo era pequeño, padre me dijo un día que, en caso de cambiar de residencia, lo haría siempre hacia el sur, pero no estoy seguro de eso. Barde Massey dice, y él conoce el sur, que los hombres del norte son de mejor raza que los del sur, de cabeza más dura y de cuerpo más robusto, así como de mayor estatura. Y luego dice que algunos de esos condados son tan llanos como la palma de la mano y que no es posible ver nada a gran distancia sin encaramarse a lo alto de los arboles más elevados. Yo no podría resistirlo. Me gusta ir a trabajar por un camino que ascienda un poco por la montaña y ver los campos a muchos kilómetros alrededor, un puente o una ciudad, y alguno que otro campanario. Entonces parece que el mundo es muy grande y uno se da cuenta de que existen otros hombres que trabajan con la cabeza y con las manos, como uno mismo.

—A mí me gustan más las montañas —dijo Seth— cuando las nubes se hallan por encima de nuestras cabezas y se ve el sol brillar a lo lejos; he contemplado varias veces este espectáculo, sobre todo en días de tormenta. Y me parece como si aquello fuese el cielo, donde sólo existe la alegría y la luz del sol, a pesar de que la vida es oscura y nebulosa.

—Pues a mí me gusta mucho Stonyshire —observó Dinah—. No quisiera volver el rostro hacia las regiones ricas en trigo y en ganado y donde la tierra es tan llana y fácil de recorrer, ni volver la espalda a las montañas donde los pobres llevan una vida dura y miserable y los hombres pasan el día en las minas, lejos de la luz del sol. Es una bendición, en un día gris y frío, cuando el cielo se oscurece sobre las montañas, sentir el amor de Dios en el alma y llevarlo a las casas de piedra, solitarias y desnudas, donde no hay nada más que pueda consolar a la gente.

—Bien hace al hablar de este modo —dijo Lisbeth—. Sus palabras me recuerdan las campanillas blancas, que viven días y días en el jarro sin nada más que una gota de agua y unos momentos de sol; pero la gente hambrienta haría mucho mejor abandonando las regiones miserables. Cuando la torta es pequeña, conviene que sean pocos los que la coman. En cuanto a ti —añadió mirando a Adam—, no hables de ir al sur y al norte, dejando a tus padres en el cementerio para vivir en un país que no conoces. Estoy segura de que no descansaría bien en la tumba si no te viese los domingos en el cementerio.

—No temas —dijo Adam—. Si estuviera decidido a marcharme, ya lo habría hecho. —Ya había tomado su desayuno y se puso de pie mientras pronunciaba estas últimas palabras.

—¿Qué vas a hacer ahora? —preguntó Lisbeth—. ¿Construirás el ataúd de tu padre?

—No, madre —contestó Adam—. Llevaremos la madera al pueblo para que lo hagan allí.

—No, hijo mío —exclamó Lisbeth en tono quejumbroso—. No debes permitir que nadie más que tú construya el ataúd de tu padre. ¿Quién lo haría tan bien? Y él, que sabía distinguir la calidad del trabajo, agradecerá que su hijo, que es el mejor y más inteligente carpintero del pueblo y hasta de Treddleston, haga su ataúd.

—Bueno, madre. Si así lo quieres, lo construiré. Creí que no te gustaría oír que se hacía este trabajo aquí.

—¿Y por qué no habría de gustarme? Es como debe ser. Y además, ¿qué tiene que ver que me guste o que no me guste? En este mundo he tenido que soportar muchas cosas que no me gustaban y nunca he podido elegir. Cuando la boca no puede distinguir sabores, lo mismo es comer una cosa que otra. Deberías empezar el ataúd esta misma mañana, pues no quisiera que lo tocase nadie más que tú.

Los ojos de Adam se fijaron en Seth, quien lo miró a su vez con cierta ansiedad después de contemplar a Dinah.

—No, madre —dijo—. Si hay que hacerlo en casa, tampoco querré que nadie, a excepción de Seth, ponga en él las manos. Pero he de ir al pueblo esta misma mañana, pues debo ver el señor Burge, y Seth podría quedarse en casa para empezar el ataúd. Volveré hacia las doce, y entonces él podrá marcharse.

—No, no —insistió Lisbeth empezando a llorar—. Me darías un disgusto si no haces tú solo el ataúd de tu padre. Eres tan hábil y vigoroso que tu madre cree que podrás realizar solo la tarea. Con frecuencia te enojaste contra tu padre durante su vida, y ahora que nos ha dejado has de portarte mejor con él. Estáte seguro de que él nunca hubiese encargado a Seth la construcción de mi ataúd.

—No digas nada más, Adam, cállate —añadió Seth cariñosamente, aunque advertía que hacia un esfuerzo para hablar—. Madre tiene razón. Yo iré a trabajar y tú puedes quedarte en casa.

Inmediatamente se dirigió al taller, seguido por Adam, mientras que Lisbeth, obedeciendo de modo automático a sus viejas costumbres, empezó a sacar la mesa, como si quisiera indicar que Dinah no tenía que seguir ocupando su lugar. La joven no dijo una palabra y aprovechó la oportunidad de reunirse, sin hacer ruido, con los dos hermanos que estaban en el taller.

Ambos se habían puesto ya los delantales y los gorros de papel, y Adam estaba de pie, con la mano izquierda apoyada en el hombro de Seth, mientras que con el martillo, que sostenía en la otra mano, mostraba algunos tablones a su hermano. Los dos volvían la espalda a la puerta por la que entró Dinah, y ésta se acercó a ellos con tanto silencio que no se dieron cuenta de su presencia hasta oír su voz.

—Seth Bede.

Seth se sobresaltó y ambos hermanos volvieron el rostro. Dinah, que parecía no ver a Adam, fijó los ojos en el rostro de Seth y añadió con acento bondadoso y tranquilo:

—No me despido todavía. Le volveré a ver cuando vuelva del trabajo. Con tal de que yo llegue a la hacienda antes de oscurecer, ya estará bien.

—Gracias Dinah. Me gustaría acompañarla otra vez a su casa. Quizás será la última vez.

La voz de Seth temblaba ligeramente. Dinah extendió la mano y dijo:

—Hoy reinará la paz en su mente, Seth, a causa de la ternura y la paciencia que ha demostrado con su anciana madre.

La joven se volvió y salió del taller con tanta rapidez y silencio como había entrado. Adam la había estado observando, aunque ella no le había mirado. Y en cuanto se hubo marchado, dijo:

—No me extraña que la ames, Seth; su rostro es como un lirio.

El alma de Seth se asomó a sus labios y a sus ojos. Nunca había confesado su secreto a Adam y experimentó una sensación deliciosa de alivio al contestar:

—Sí, Adam, la amo, y me temo que demasiado. Pero ella no me corresponde, ya que solamente tiene por mí el amor que un hijo de Dios siente por otro. Jamás querrá un hombre como marido.

—No, muchacho. Eso no puede asegurarse. No debes perder el ánimo. Es una mujer hecha con materiales más finos que las otras. Eso es evidente. Pero si las aventaja en otras cosas, no creo que carezca de la facultad de amar.

No dijeron nada más. Seth salió en dirección al pueblo y Adam empezó la construcción del ataúd.

«Dios le ayude, y también a mí —pensó mientras levantaba el tablón—. Nos parecemos bastante en que ambos creemos que la vida es un trabajo muy duro y que hemos de esforzarnos mucho, tanto con nuestras manos como con nosotros mismos. Es muy raro que un hombre sea capaz de levantar una silla con los dientes y andar así ochenta kilómetros, y, sin embargo, se ponga a temblar y sienta frío y calor cuando lo mira una joven determinada, para él muy diferente de todas las demás mujeres del mundo. No podemos explicar este misterio; pero es verdad que tampoco comprendemos cómo germina una semilla».

XII

En el bosque

Aquel mismo jueves por la mañana, mientras Arthur Donnithorne iba de un lado a otro por su vestidor, contemplándose en los espejos antiguos y mirando de vez en vez un tapiz de color verde oliva en el que se veía la figura de la hija del faraón y sus doncellas cuidando del niño Moisés, sostenía una discusión consigo mismo, y en el momento en que su criado le colgaba del hombro el cabestrillo de seda negra, llegó a una resolución definitiva.

—Me propongo ir a Eagledale a pescar durante una semana más o menos —dijo en voz alta—, y vendrás conmigo, Pym. Saldremos esta mañana, de modo que procura estar preparado a las once y media.

El silbido que le ayudó a tomar esta resolución se convirtió en una fuerte voz de tenor, y cuando pasaba por el corredor entonó su canción favorita de la *Opera Beggar's*: «Cuando el corazón del hombre está agobiado por los cuidados». No era ningún canto heroico, pero él, por su parte, se sentía héroe al dirigirse hacia las cuadras para dar órdenes en relación a los caballos. Necesitaba su propia aprobación, y alegrarse gratuitamente no era ningún tipo de aprobación, pues para conseguirla convenía adquirir cierta cantidad de mérito. Jamás desdeñó tal aprobación, y tenía una fe considerable en sus propias virtudes. Ningún joven era capaz de confesar sus faltas con mayor sinceridad, pues ésta era una de sus virtudes favoritas. ¿Y cómo se notará la sinceridad de un hombre plenamente si no puede hablar de algunos fracasos de esa misma virtud? Además, tenía la seguridad absoluta de que sus faltas provenían de su carácter generoso e impetuoso, que eran debidas a su sangre caliente, leonina; que jamás se arrastraba ni se valía de habilidades o de argucias. No era posible que Arthur Donnithorne hiciese nada que fuese bajo, cobarde o cruel: «No. Soy un individuo capaz de meterme en cualquier dificultad, pero nunca he eludido las consecuencias». Por desgracia, no hay justicia poética inherente a las dificultades, que a veces se niegan de un modo obstinado a infligir sus peores consecuencias en el primer pecador, a pesar de que éste exprese su deseo en voz alta. Y sólo a causa de esta deficiencia en el orden de las cosas, Arthur pudo, aparte de complicarse él, complicar a otra persona en un suceso desagradable. Era un muchacho bondadoso y sus ideas para el futuro, cuando entrase en posesión de la propiedad, comprendían un estado próspero, la satisfacción de sus arrendatarios, que adorarían a su señor, el cual sería un modelo de caballero inglés, pues tendría su mansión en magnífico estado; en todas partes se advertiría una elegancia exquisita: los criados serían muy agradables, tendría la mejor cuadra de Loamshire, la bolsa abierta para cualquier beneficio público y, en una palabra, la situación sería lo más distinta posible de la que en la actualidad se asociaba con el nombre de Donnithorne. Y una de las primeras y buenas acciones que llevaría a cabo en aquel futuro sería aumentar el beneficio de Irwine en el vicariato de Hayslope, con objeto de que pudiese sostener un carruaje para su madre y sus hermanas. Su cordial afecto hacia el rector le venía de la infancia. Era un afecto en parte filial y en parte fraternal; lo bastante fraternal para que prefiriese la compañía de Irwine a la de otros hombres más jóvenes, y filial en que procuraba evitar que Irwine desaprobara su conducta.

Ya se advierte que Arthur Donnithorne era un buen muchacho y así le consideraban sus compañeros de estudios. No podía ver a nadie en un apuro. Habría lamentado en extremo, aun en sus momentos de mayor irritación, que le ocurriese algo desagradable a su abuelo; y su tía Lydia gozaba también del beneficio de la blandura de corazón que experimentaba hacía el sexo femenino en general. A la cuestión de si tendría bastante dominio sobre sí mismo como para ser siempre tan inofensivo y deseoso de hacer bien como le

dictaba su buen corazón, nadie habría podido responder. Sólo tenía veintiún años, según recordará el lector, y, por otra parte, no se hacen demasiadas preguntas sobre el carácter de un individuo guapo, generoso y joven que en el porvenir gozará de propiedad suficiente para pagarse numerosos pecadillos; un individuo que, si alguien sufriera un accidente a causa de su imprudente modo de conducir, podría otorgarle una buena pensión vitalicia; o quien, si llegase a mancillar la existencia de una mujer, la compensaría con caros bombones, empaquetados y dedicados con sus manos. Sería ridículo mostrarse exigente y analítico en tales casos, como si se hiciesen investigaciones acerca del carácter de un empleado de confianza. Empleamos epítetos caballerescos de sentido general y poco preciso para un joven de buena cuna y rico; y las damas, con la fina intuición que caracteriza a su sexo, advierten en el acto que es alguien «agradable». Lo más natural sería que atravesara la vida sin escandalizar a nadie, que fuese un digno barco que nadie se negaría a asegurar. Es cierto que los buques están sujetos a eventualidades que a veces ponen en terrible evidencia algún defecto de construcción, que jamás se habría descubierto en aguas tranquilas; y muchos «buenos muchachos» han sufrido semejante traición a causa de una combinación desastrosa de las circunstancias.

Pero no tenemos ninguna base firme para hacer augurios desfavorables sobre Arthur Donnithorne, que aquella misma mañana demostraba ser capaz de una prudente resolución fundada en la conciencia. Una cosa resultaba clara. La naturaleza cuidó de que jamás se extraviara quedando satisfecho de sí mismo; nunca iría más allá de la frontera del pecado, pues se veía perpetuamente atacado desde el lado opuesto de la frontera. Jamás sería un cortesano del vicio ni llevaría en el ojal sus condecoraciones.

Serían entonces las diez de la mañana, y el sol difundía su luz brillante; todo parecía más bonito a causa de la lluvia del día anterior. En tales mañanas resulta muy agradable pasear por el camino lleno de grava que conduce a las cuadras propias mientras se medita una excursión. Pero el olor de las cuadras que, en el orden natural de las cosas, debería formar parte de las influencias calmantes de un hombre, siempre irritaba un poco a Arthur. En las cuadras no podía obrar a su antojo, porque todo era gobernado con la mayor exactitud y precisión. Su abuelo insistía en conservar como jefe de las caballerizas a un viejo mastuerzo a quien nadie podía apartar de sus costumbres, y que tenía el permiso de contratar a sus subordinados, uno de los cuales recientemente había probado un par de tijeras cortando una faja oblonga en el pelaje de la yegua baya de Arthur. Tal estado de cosas era, naturalmente, desagradable; uno puede resignarse a las molestias de la casa, pero el hecho de que la cuadra sea una escena de vejaciones y disgustos es algo que el hombre no puede soportar mucho tiempo sin riesgo de caer en la misantropía.

El rostro del viejo John, arrugado y de un color parecido a la madera, fue la primera cosa que vieron los ojos de Arthur al entrar en el patio de la cuadra, y le quitó toda la satisfacción que podían haberle causado los ladridos de los dos mastines que vigilaban la cuadra. Nunca había podido hablar con paciencia con aquel viejo imbécil.

—Procure que Meg esté ensillada para mí y la lleven a la puerta de la casa a las once y media. También necesitaré a Rattler para Pym a la misma hora. ¿Ha entendido?

—Sí, ya lo oigo, capitán —dijo el viejo John siguiendo a su joven amo al interior de la cuadra.

El caballerizo consideraba que un joven señor es un enemigo natural de un servidor antiguo, y también creía que los jóvenes en general sirven muy poco a los progresos del mundo.

Arthur entró con objeto de acariciar a Meg, procurando al mismo tiempo no mirar la cuadra para no ponerse de malhumor antes del desayuno. El magnífico animal estaba en uno de los compartimientos interiores, y volvió su fina cabeza al notar la aproximación de su amo. El diminuto *spaniel* Trot, que era el compañero inseparable de la yegua en la cuadra, estaba cómodamente enroscado sobre su grupa.

—Bien, Meg, bonita mía —dijo Arthur acariciándole el cuello—. Esta mañana vamos a dar un magnífico paseo.

—Nada de eso, señor. No podrá ser —dijo John.

—¿Por qué?

—Porque está coja.

—¿Está coja? ¿Qué quiere decir?

—Pues que el muchacho la acercó demasiado a los caballos de Dalton y uno de ellos se le echó encima y la yegua ha quedado con la canilla de la pata anterior magullada a causa del golpe.

El juicioso historiador se abstiene de narrar con precisión lo que siguió. Ya se comprende que allí se oyeron palabras gruesas y también algunas voces acariciadoras, mientras el joven examinaba la pata del animal; que John estaba tan poco emocionado como si fuese un bastón esculpido, y que Arthur Donnithorne traspuso las puertas de hierro del patio de la cuadra sin cantar, como había hecho al llegar.

Estaba furioso. En la cuadra no había otra montura para él y para su criado, aparte de Meg y Rattler. Era muy molesto. Y precisamente cuando quería ausentarse durante una o dos semanas. Le pareció que la

providencia era culpable por permitir tal combinación de circunstancias. Por si fuera poco estar encerrado en el cazadero con un brazo roto, cuando todos los compañeros de regimiento se divertían en Windsor…, encerrado con su abuelo, que sentía por él el mismo cariño que tenía por sus escrituras en pergamino… había que discutir a cada momento todas las decisiones del gobierno de la casa y de la propiedad. En tales circunstancias un hombre no tiene más remedio que ponerse de malhumor, y esta irritación ha de exteriorizarla de un modo u otro.

«Salkeld se habría bebido una botella de Oporto cada día —murmuró—. Pero yo no estoy bastante maduro para eso. En fin, puesto que no puedo ir a Eagledale, iré a galopar un poco con Rattler en dirección a Norburne, y almorzaré con Gawaine».

Debajo de esta resolución explícita había otra implícita. Si almorzaba con Gawaine y se entretenía charlando con él, no volvería al cazadero hasta cerca de las cinco, de modo que ya no podría ver a Hetty en la habitación del ama de llaves; y cuando saliera ésta para volver a su casa, él habría cenado y tendría pereza de salir, y así no correría peligro de ver a la joven. En realidad, no había nada malo en mostrarse bondadoso con la chica y casi prefería poder contemplar a Hetty por espacio de media hora que bailar con media docena de muchachas hermosas en cualquier fiesta. Pero quizás haría mejor en no fijarse más en ella. Eso la haría crearse expectativas, según había observado Irwine; aunque Arthur, por su parte, creía que las muchachas no eran tan blandas como para eso, ni se impresionaban con tanta facilidad; en realidad, siempre había pensado que eran dos veces más frías y astutas que él mismo. Y en cuanto a perjudicar realmente a Hetty, no había que pensar en ello; Arthur Donnithorne aceptaba con absoluto rigor la obligación que él mismo se imponía.

Así, el sol de mediodía le vio galopar hacia Norburne y, por suerte, halló en su camino la oportunidad de hacer saltar un poco a Rattler. No hay nada que equivalga a hacer saltar un caballo sobre las matas o a través de una zanja para exorcizar a un demonio. Y es realmente asombroso que los centauros, que gozaban en este sentido de ventajas inmensas, hayan dejado una reputación tan mala en la historia.

Después de eso, tal vez el lector se sorprenda al saber que, aunque encontró a Gawaine, apenas las manecillas del reloj del patio dejaron de señalar las tres cuando Arthur estaba de vuelta, echó pie a tierra, abandonando al jadeante Rattler, y penetró rápidamente en la casa para almorzar apresuradamente. Pero creo que desde entonces ha habido hombres que emprendieron una larga carrera para evitar un encuentro y que luego retrocedieron al galope para no perder la ocasión de tenerlo. Es la estratagema favorita de nuestras pasiones fingir una retirada y dar, después, media vuelta sobre nosotros mismos en el momento en que hemos decidido que la victoria ya es nuestra.

—El capitán ha hecho correr su caballo al galope —dijo muy satisfecho el cochero Dalton, que estaba fumando su pipa apoyado en la pared de la cuadra al ver cómo John traía de la brida a Rattler.

—¡Ojalá hubiese otro encargado para cuidar este caballo! —gruñó John.

—Sí, y que este otro fuese algo más amable —observó Dalton.

Y le pareció tan buena esta broma que cuando se quedó solo en escena continuó quitándose la pipa de la boca de vez en cuando para hacer un guiño a un imaginario público y luego entregarse a un acceso de risa silenciosa que le agitaba de pies a cabeza. Mentalmente se repetía el diálogo desde el principio, a fin de poder recordarlo en cuanto se hallara en el comedor de los criados.

Cuando Arthur subió a su vestidor después de almorzar, fue inevitable que la discusión que había tenido consigo mismo pocas horas antes volviese a cruzar su cerebro. Pero le era imposible repetirse las reflexiones que le decidieron entonces, del mismo modo que no podía volver a oler el aroma peculiar del aire que le dio en la cara al abrir la ventana. Volvió a sentir el deseo de ver a Hetty y se asombró ante la fuerza con que aquel capricho se apoderaba de él, de manera que casi temblaba al peinarse, aun cuando no comprendía ese impulso de galopar con tanta imprudencia en su viaje de regreso. Todo esto se debía a que había convertido en algo serio un asunto que carecía de importancia, creyendo que no podía tener consecuencias desagradables. Y decidió complacerse viendo aquel día a Hetty para, luego, arrojar el asunto de su mente. Toda la culpa la tenía Irwine. «Si Irwine no hubiera dicho nada, no habría pensado más en Hetty que en la cojera de Meg». Sin embargo, era un día muy apropiado para pasarlo en el Hermitage y se propuso ir antes de cenar, con objeto de terminar la novela que estaba leyendo, el *Zaluco* del doctor Moore. El Hermitage se hallaba en la Arboleda de Abetos, es decir, en el camino que con toda seguridad tomaría Hetty al salir de Hall Farm. Por consiguiente, nada era más sencillo ni natural, y el encuentro con Hetty sería una sencilla casualidad de su paseo y no su objeto.

La sombra de Arthur se proyectaba en los gruesos robles del cazadero con más rapidez de lo que podría haberse esperado de un hombre fatigado en una tarde calurosa, y apenas habían dado las cuatro cuando el joven se encontraba ante la alta y estrecha puerta que conducía al delicioso bosque laberíntico que se

hallaba en un extremo del cazadero y recibía el nombre de Arboleda de Abetos, no porque estos árboles abundasen, sino precisamente porque eran pocos. Era aquél un bosque de hayas y tilos, entre los que había algún plateado abedul; es decir, que era uno de aquellos bosques que suelen frecuentar las ninfas, entre cuyos matas se ven brillar a veces sus miembros iluminados; en otras ocasiones es posible descubrirlas mientras observan amparadas en el tronco de un alto tilo: se oyen sus risas suaves, pero si el espectador muestra demasiada curiosidad sacrílega, se desvanecen por detrás de las plateadas hayas, hacen creer al importuno que sus voces no eran más que el murmullo de las aguas del arroyo, y quizás se metamorfosean en una ardilla de color pardo, que huye y se burla del curioso mirándolo desde una rama elevada. En esa arboleda la hierba no estaba recortada ni el suelo cubierto de grava, sino que sus senderos eran de tierra y estaban bordeados por una ligera faja de musgo delicado. Parecía como si aquellos senderos hubieran sido formados por los árboles y por los setos que se hacían reverentemente a un lado para contemplar a la majestuosa reina de las ninfas de blancos pies.

Arthur Donnithorne pasó por el más ancho de aquellos senderos, que se hallaba bajo una avenida de tilos y hayas. La tarde era tranquila y la dorada luz del sol parecía reposar lánguidamente sobre las ramas más altas, atravesando aquí y allá las hojas para iluminar el camino rojizo y sus bordes de musgo; era una de esas tardes en que el destino disfraza su rostro horriblemente frío detrás de un velo radiante, nos rodea con olas suaves y cálidas y nos envenena con su aliento que huele a violetas. Arthur andaba sin cuidado, con un libro debajo del brazo, pero no miraba al suelo, como suelen hacer los meditabundos, sino que sus ojos se fijaban en la curva del camino por la que iba a aparecer una pequeña figura. ¡Ah! Ya había llegado. Primero apareció una brillante mancha de color, como un pájaro tropical, entre los arbustos, y luego una figura que se movía, que se cubría la cabeza con un sombrero redondo y llevaba un cestito bajo el brazo. Después ya se distinguió una joven, muy sonrojada, casi asustada, pero sonriente, saludando con una reverencia, en su rostro una expresión temerosa y feliz al advertir que Arthur se acercaba a ella. Si éste hubiese tenido tiempo de pensar, le habría parecido extraño que él también estuviese tan agitado y se sonrojara; en una palabra, que pareciese sorprendido como si no fuese ella la persona que esperaba. ¡Pobres muchachos! Era una lástima que no estuviesen aún en la dorada edad de la infancia, pues entonces habrían permanecido frente a frente, mirándose con tímida simpatía, y luego se habrían dado un beso y habrían echado a correr para jugar juntos. Arthur habría vuelto a su lecho de cortinas de seda y Hetty a apoyar la cabeza en la almohada de hilo de casa y ambos hubiesen dormido sin soñar, y al día siguiente apenas se habrían acordado del anterior.

Arthur dio media vuelta y empezó a andar al lado de Hetty, sin dar ninguna razón. Estaban completamente solos por primera vez. ¡Qué solemne resulta la primera vez que uno camina a solas con una mujer! El joven no se atrevió, durante uno o dos minutos, a mirar a la hermosa mantequera. En cuanto a ésta, le parecía que sus pies reposaban en una nube y que la impulsaba suavemente el céfiro. Había olvidado sus lazos de color de rosa; apenas sentía sus propios miembros, como si su alma infantil se hubiese transferido a un lirio acuático que reposara en un lecho líquido y calentado por los estivales rayos del sol. Podrá parecer una contradicción, pero, gracias a esta timidez, Arthur recobró una buena parte de su valor y de su confianza. De todos modos, era el suyo un estado mental muy distinto del que había esperado en aquel primer encuentro; y aunque estaba lleno de un sentimiento vago, en aquellos momentos de silencio pudo decirse que sus anteriores discusiones y escrúpulos resultaban innecesarios por completo.

—Hace bien al escoger este camino para venir al cazadero —dijo, por fin mirando a Hetty—. Es mucho más bonito y corto que yendo por cualquiera de las dos casas.

—Sí, señor —contestó Hetty con voz trémula y apenas audible.

Ignoraba cómo debía hablar con un caballero como el señor Arthur, y su misma vanidad acabó por hacer más tímida su conversación.

—¿Viene todas las semanas a ver a la señora Pomfret?

—Sí, señor. Todos los jueves, a excepción de los días en que sale con la señorita Donnithorne.

—¿Y le enseña algo?

—Sí, señor. Me enseña a arreglar encajes, según ella aprendió en el extranjero, y también a zurcir medias de manera que apenas se vea el sitio donde se ha hecho el arreglo. También me enseña a cortar.

—¿Acaso se propone ser doncella?

—Me gustaría mucho.

Hetty hablaba ya de un modo más perceptible, pero todavía con voz trémula; y se dijo que quizás pareciese tan tonta ante él capitán Donnithorne como Luke Britton le parecía a ella.

—Sin duda, la señora Pomfret la espera a esta hora.

—Me espera a las cuatro, pero hoy me he retrasado porque mi tía me necesitaba. Sin embargo, la hora

acostumbrada es las cuatro, porque así tenemos tiempo antes de que la señorita Donnithorne haga sonar la campanilla.

—Pues, en tal caso, no quiero entretenerla, aunque me habría gustado mostrarle el Hermitage. ¿Lo ha visto alguna vez?

—No, señor.

—Este es el camino que conduce allá. Pero ahora no debemos ir. Si quiere verlo, ya se lo enseñaré otro día.

—Se lo agradeceré mucho, señor.

—¿Y vuelve siempre sola por la noche, sin miedo de recorrer el camino?

—No tengo miedo. Además, nunca lo hago muy tarde. Suelo salir hacia las ocho, cuando todavía hay algo de luz. Mi tía se enfadaría mucho si no volviese a casa antes de las nueve.

—Tal vez Craig, el jardinero, cuida de usted.

El rostro y el cuello de Hetty se sonrojaron intensamente.

—Estoy segura de que no. Estoy convencida de que no lo ha hecho nunca. Además, yo no le dejaría. Ese hombre no me gusta —dijo apresuradamente.

Y las lágrimas asomaron a sus ojos con tal rapidez, que enseguida tenía una rodando por su cálida mejilla. Entonces se avergonzó de llorar y por un instante desapareció toda su felicidad. Sin embargo, luego sintió que un brazo le rodeaba el cuerpo y que una voz cariñosa le decía:

—¿Por qué llora, Hetty? No quise molestarla. Por nada del mundo quisiera apenarla, preciosa. Vamos, no llore. Míreme, pues de lo contrario, creeré que no me perdona.

Arthur puso su mano sobre el brazo suave de la joven y se inclinó hacia ella, dirigiéndole una mirada de amorosa súplica.

Hetty levantó sus largas y húmedas pestañas y fijó en los ojos vueltos hacia ella una mirada dulce, tímida y suplicante. ¡Qué maravillosos fueron aquellos momentos en que se miraron sus ojos y sus brazos se tocaron! El amor es una cosa tonta y sencilla cuando sólo tenemos veintiún años y una dulce muchacha de diecisiete tiembla bajo nuestra mirada, como si ella fuese un capullo que abre su corazón con maravillado entusiasmo a la luz de la mañana. Aquellas dos almas jóvenes y sinceras iban una al encuentro de otra como dos melocotones aterciopelados que, resbalando por el suelo, se ponen en contacto y luego se quedan inmóviles; y sus almas se unieron con la misma facilidad con que dos arroyuelos se confunden, sin pedir ni desear más que mezclar sus aguas y describir suaves curvas por los escondrijos que les ofrecen la hierba y las hojas. Mientras Arthur miraba a los suplicantes ojos de Hetty, no le importaba el inglés que ella hablase, y aunque entonces hubiesen estado de moda los miriñaques y el cabello empolvado, no se habría fijado siquiera en que Hetty no llevaba tales muestras de elegancia.

De pronto se sobresaltaron al caer algo al suelo haciendo bastante ruido. Era el cesto de Hetty y por el sendero quedaron diseminados todos los avíos de coser y algunos de ellos demostraron tener notables condiciones para rodar un gran trecho. Los dos jóvenes pasaron un buen rato recogiendo todas aquellas cosas y, mientras tanto, no pronunciaron una palabra; pero cuando Arthur volvió a colgar el cestita en el brazo de la muchacha, la pobrecilla advirtió una extraña diferencia en el aspecto y en los modales de su compañero, quien se limitó a estrecharle la mano y a decirle en un tono que a ella le pareció glacial:

—La he entretenido y no conviene que se detenga más. Sin duda la aguardan en la casa. ¡Adiós!

Sin esperar su respuesta se volvió y se alejó en dirección al sendero que conducía al Hermitage, dejando que Hetty continuara su camino sumida en un extraño sueño que, al parecer, empezaba de un modo delicioso y luego se veía contrariado y sumido en la tristeza. ¿La encontraría él otra vez cuando regresara a casa? ¿Por qué le había hablado como si estuviera disgustado con ella? ¿Y por qué se había alejado tan repentinamente? La joven se echó a llorar casi sin saber por qué.

Arthur, por su parte, estaba también inquieto, aunque se daba más cuenta de sus sentimientos. Echó a correr hacia el Hermitage en el corazón del bosque; abrió apresuradamente la puerta, entró y la volvió a cerrar con violencia; ya dentro, metiéndose la mano derecha en el bolsillo, recorrió cuatro o cinco veces la pequeña estancia y luego se sentó en la otomana, de un modo incómodo, como solemos hacer cuando no queremos abandonarnos a nuestros sentimientos.

Era evidente que estaba enamorado de Hetty. Se hallaba a punto de prescindir de todo para rendirse a aquella sensación deliciosa que acababa de descubrir. Era inútil ocultarse la verdad, y no había duda de que si él continuaba fijándose en la joven, pronto nacería el amor entre ellos. ¿Y cuál sería el resultado? Pocas semanas después él se vería obligado a marcharse y la pobrecilla sería muy desgraciada. Debía evitar volverla a ver a solas y esforzarse en alejarse de su camino. ¡Qué tonto había sido al regresar tan pronto de casa de su amigo Gawaine!

Se puso en pie y abrió las ventanas para dejar entrar la suave brisa de la tarde y el saludable aroma de los abetos que rodeaban el Hermitage. El aire suave no contribuyó a dar fuerza a su resolución, mientras, apoyado en la ventana, miraba a lo lejos entre los árboles. Pero creyó que su resolución era bastante firme y que no había necesidad de seguir pensando en ello. Estaba ya decidido a evitar sucesivos encuentros con Hetty y, en vista de eso, podía ya entregarse a pensar en lo muy agradable que sería aquello si las circunstancias fuesen distintas. ¡Cuánto le gustaría haber acudido a su encuentro aquella misma tarde, cuando ella se dispusiera a regresar, y rodearle la cintura con su brazo para contemplar su dulce rostro! Se preguntó si la hermosa chiquilla estaría pensando a su vez en él. Podía apostarse veinte contra uno a que, en efecto, era así. ¡Qué hermosos tenía los ojos con las pestañas húmedas de lágrimas! Luego se dijo que le gustaría mucho satisfacer su alma, sólo una vez más, contemplando de nuevo aquellos ojos, y así, resolvió verla otra vez. Quería verla sencillamente para alejar cualquier falsa impresión de la mente de la joven acerca de su conducta en el momento de separarse. Y se esforzaría en obrar con ella de un modo apacible y bondadoso, para que la joven no volviese a su casa con la cabeza llena de ilusiones engañosas. Sí, eso sería lo mejor que podía hacer.

Trascurrió más de una hora antes de que las meditaciones de Arthur le inclinasen a tomar esta resolución, pero, una vez la hubo adoptado, ya no se sintió con fuerzas para seguir en el Hermitage. Era preciso ocupar el tiempo que faltaba hasta encontrarse de nuevo con Hetty, y entonces advirtió que ya era bastante tarde para ir a vestirse antes de cenar, pues su abuelo tenía la costumbre de sentarse a la mesa a las seis en punto.

XIII

El crepúsculo en el bosque

Ocurrió que la señora Pomfret había tenido aquella mañana una ligera disputa con la señora Best, el ama de llaves, hecho del que resultaron dos consecuencias muy convenientes para Hetty. Causó que la señora Pomfret tomara el té en su habitación y además inspiró a aquella doncella ejemplar el recuerdo de otros muchos detalles de la conducta de la señora Best y de las conversaciones en que la señora Best aparecía en inferioridad como interlocutora de la señora Pomfret; gracias a eso, Hetty no tuvo necesidad de mayor presencia de ánimo que la necesaria para manejar la aguja y contestar «sí» o «no» de vez en cuando. Habría querido marcharse antes de lo acostumbrado, pero no lo hizo porque le había dicho al capitán Donnithorne que solía salir hacia las ocho y, por consiguiente, ¿qué ocurriría si él iba otra vez a la arboleda para verla y ella se había marchado ya? ¿Se le presentaría otra vez? Su almita de mariposa revoloteaba de un modo incesante entre los recuerdos y las dudosas esperanzas. Por fin la saeta del reloj de bronce antiguo señaló las ocho menos cuarto, y entonces la joven ya tuvo motivo para pensar en marcharse; incluso la mente preocupada de la señora Pomfret no dejó de advertir que Hetty parecía estar más hermosa que nunca en el momento en que se ataba el sombrero ante el espejo.

«Esa niña cada día está más guapa —se dijo—. Es una lástima. No por eso conseguirá antes un buen empleo o un marido. Los hombres formales no se casan con esas muchachas tan hermosas. Cuando yo era jovencita era más admirada que si hubiese sido muy guapa. Sin embargo, ella debe de estarme agradecida por lo que le enseño, a fin de que pueda ganarse, más adelante, el pan, pues eso le servirá mucho más que el trabajo a que se dedique en la granja. Siempre me dijeron que soy bondadosa y, por desgracia, es verdad, porque de lo contrario no me vería como me veo sujeta a las órdenes del ama de llaves».

Hetty atravesó rápidamente el parque, temerosa de encontrar al señor Craig, a quien quizás no habría podido dirigir una palabra amable. ¡Qué aliviada se sintió al verse a salvo bajo los robles y entre los helechos del cazadero! Pero a pesar de todo, se asustó tanto como el gamo que saltó al notar la aproximación de la joven. Hetty apenas se fijó en la luz de la tarde que alumbraba suavemente las herbosas avenidas entre los helechos y acentuaba más la belleza del verde que cuando resplandecía el sol del mediodía. La joven no se fijó en nada. Sólo veía algo posible: que el señor Arthur Donnithorne se acercase a ella otra vez desde la Arboleda de los Abetos. Este era el primer plano del cuadro que Hetty pintaba en su imaginación; en segundo término no había más que algo iluminado y confuso, unos días muy distintos de los que hasta entonces se habían sucedido en su vida. Se sentía como si la solicitara un dios fluvial que en cualquier momento podía arrebatarla y llevarla a los maravillosos palacios que poseía bajo un cielo acuático. No se podía saber lo que ocurriría después de aquella seductora delicia. Si le hubiesen mandado una caja llena de satén, de encajes y joyas de procedencia desconocida, ¿cómo podría pensar otra cosa sino que iba a cambiar su suerte y que el día siguiente le traería algunas alegrías? Hetty no había leído nunca una novela: si había tropezado con alguna, creo que las palabras le resultarían ininteligibles. ¿Cómo podía encontrar, pues, una imagen que concordase con sus esperanzas? Así que éstas eran informes, igual que los lánguidos y dulces aromas del jardín que había en el cazadero y que flotaban a su alrededor mientras atravesaba el portillo.

En este momento se halla junto a otro portillo que conduce a la Arboleda de los Abetos. Penetra en el bosque, donde la luz empieza a disminuir, y a cada paso que da se acentúan sus temores. ¿Y si no viene? ¡Oh, que espantoso le parecía llegar al otro extremo del bosque, al camino que corría más allá de los árboles, sin haberle visto! Llega al primer recodo del sendero que conduce al Hermitage andando despacio,

y él no está allí. Entonces odia al lebrato que atraviesa corriendo el sendero y siente animadversión por todo cuanto ve y no es lo que espera. Sigue andando, contenta al ver el próximo recodo del sendero, pues se dice que tal vez estará allí. Pero no. Se ha engañado. Empieza a llorar con el corazón tan triste que las lágrimas le enturbian la vista; y da un gran sollozo mientras tiemblan las comisuras de su boca y las lágrimas ruedan por sus mejillas.

No sabe que el camino describe otra curva antes de llegar al Hermitage, y también que ya se halla muy cerca de aquel lugar y que Donnithorne está a muy pocos metros de distancia. Este, por su parte, se siente dominado por un solo pensamiento: verla. Va a ver a Hetty, y el anhelo de que se presente de nuevo esa ocasión es, para él, como la sed ardiente que experimenta el que sufre un ataque de fiebre. Desde luego no se propone hablar con el acento acariciador que, con la mayor imprudencia, ha empleado antes, sino dejar las cosas en su punto con ella, empleando una bondad que tenga el aspecto de cortesía amistosa y evite que la joven se separe de él con ideas equivocadas acerca de sus relaciones mutuas.

Si Hetty hubiese sabido que él estaba allí, tal vez no habría llorado; pero hubiera sido mejor, porque entonces Arthur quizás se habría portado como se proponía; pero el caso es que la joven llegó al extremo del sendero y levantó los ojos hacia él mientras dos grandes lágrimas rodaban por sus mejillas. ¿Qué podía hacer, pues, el joven, sino hablarle con tono suave y acariciador, como si fuese una perrita *spaniel* de brillantes ojos que se hubiese clavado una espina en la pata?

—¿La he asustado, Hetty? ¿Ha visto alguna cosa desagradable en el bosque? No se asuste. Ahora yo cuidaré de usted.

Hetty se sonrojó tanto que no pudo decirse si era feliz o desgraciada. Y se reconvino por estar llorando, persuadida de que un caballero no pensaría nada bueno de una muchacha que llorase de aquel modo. Se sintió incapaz incluso de contestar «no» y se limitó a apartar su mirada del joven, mientras se limpiaba con la mano las lágrimas de sus mejillas; una gran lágrima cayó sobre su lazo rosa.

—Vamos, alégrese otra vez. Sonría y dígame lo que ha ocurrido. Venga a decírmelo.

Hetty volvió la cabeza hacia él y murmuró:

—Me figuré que no vendría. —Y, lentamente, se reanimó lo bastante para levantar otra vez los ojos hacia él.

Aquella mirada fue demasiado: Arthur habría debido tener los ojos de piedra de las esculturas egipcias para no corresponder con una mirada tan amorosa como la de ella.

—Parece una avecilla asustada, una rosa maltratada por el viento. Es usted una tontuela. Y espero que ahora, puesto que estoy con usted, no volverá a llorar.

En realidad, el joven no sabía siquiera lo que estaba diciendo, aunque comprendió que aquello no era lo que se había propuesto. Su brazo volvió a rodear la cintura de la joven, a la que estrechó contra sí. Inclinó el rostro, cada vez más cerca de las redondas mejillas, y sus labios fueron al encuentro de aquellos otros sonrosados y apetitosos. El tiempo pareció detenerse para ambos. Arthur no sabía si era un pastor de la Arcadia o el primer joven que besaba a la primera muchacha, o el mismo Eros en persona libando en los labios de Psique… Todo le daba igual.

Durante unos minutos reinó el silencio entre ellos. Empezaron a andar, con los corazones palpitantes, hasta llegar ante el portillo que había en el extremo del bosque. Entonces se miraron con una expresión distinta a la de antes, pues en sus ojos había el recuerdo de un beso.

Pero con la fuente de dulzura había empezado a mezclarse algo amargo. Arthur se sentía inquieto. Separó el brazo de la cintura de Hetty y dijo:

—Casi estamos en el extremo de la Arboleda. Ignoro qué hora será —añadió, sacando el reloj—. Las ocho y veinte… De todos modos, mi reloj adelanta. Es mejor que nos separemos ahora. Sigue andando con tus piececitos para llegar pronto a casa. Adiós.

Ella le cogió la mano y le miró con tristeza y con una sonrisa forzada. Parecía rogarle que no se marchase aún, pero él le acarició la mejilla y repitió su adiós, de manera que la joven se vio obligada a alejarse.

En cuanto a Arthur, volvió a atravesar el bosque como si quisiera aumentar la distancia que lo separaba de Hetty. No quería volver al Hermitage; recordó los buenos propósitos que había hecho antes de cenar y que al final resultaron vanos…, mejor habría sido que no los hubiese hecho. Se dirigió en línea recta al cazadero satisfecho de salir de la Arboleda, en la que seguramente reinaba un genio maligno: sus hayas y tilos tenían un aspecto enervante. Los fuertes y nudosos robles viejos que había en el cazadero, en cambio, desprovistos de toda languidez, le infundirían cierta energía. Arthur se perdió entre los helechos y no se entretuvo en buscar el camino hasta que las sombras del crepúsculo aumentaron, reinó la noche entre los arbustos y las liebres que atravesaban los senderos le parecieron totalmente negras.

Sus sentimientos eran mucho más intensos que por la mañana. Era como si su caballo hubiera rodado por el suelo al dar un salto y luego se resistiera al dominio del jinete. Estaba irritado y descontento de sí mismo. Flirtear con Hetty era algo muy distinto que entregarse al mismo pasatiempo con una hermosa muchacha de su propia esfera. En este último caso estaba sobreentendida la diversión de ambos actores, y aunque el asunto llegase a ser serio, nada se oponía al matrimonio. En cambio, si alguien viese a Hetty paseando con él, todo el mundo empezaría a murmurar; y la excelente familia Poyser, que en tanto estimaba su buen nombre, como si por sus venas corriese la mejor sangre de la región, le odiaría por haber dado aquel escándalo en la propiedad que un día había de ser suya, y entre los arrendatarios que, ante todo, debían respetarle. Y le pareció odioso perder el aprecio de aquella buena gente, para no hablar de que no podía imaginarse a sí mismo en una situación tan indigna.

Y aun cuando nadie se enterase, podía ocurrir que él y la joven llegasen a enamorarse de verdad y de la separación inevitable resultase la desgracia para ambos. Ningún caballero, a no ser en las baladas, podía casarse con la sobrina de un granjero. Era preciso terminar cuanto antes aquel asunto; era demasiado disparatado.

Y, sin embargo, aquella misma mañana, antes de ir a visitar a su amigo Gawaine, había tomado una resolución seria; pero cuando se vio en su casa, se había visto dominado por un impulso raro, que le obligó a regresar al galope. Le pareció que no podía fiarse de sus propias resoluciones, como había hecho al principio. Incluso llegó a desear que el brazo volviera a dolerle para no pensar en otra cosa que en verse libre del dolor. Ignoraba por completo qué impulso se apoderaría de él al día siguiente, en aquel maldito lugar, donde nada ocupaba su atención durante todo el día. ¿Qué podía hacer para evitar otras tonterías?

Sólo tenía un recurso: iría a contárselo a Irwine; a contárselo todo. Sólo por el hecho de contar aquella historia llegaría a parecerle trivial. La tentación desaparecería, igual que desaparece el encanto de las palabras cariñosas cuando se repiten a oídos indiferentes. De todos modos, contárselo a Irwine le ayudaría. Y así, resolvió dirigirse a la rectoría de Broxton a la mañana siguiente después de desayunar.

En cuanto hubo tomado esta resolución, empezó a buscar el camino para regresar a casa, y finalmente cogió el que le pareció más directo. Estaba seguro de que podría dormir, pues se hallaba bastante cansado y no había necesidad de pensar en nada más.

XIV

El regreso

Mientras se despedían los dos jóvenes en el bosque, hubo otra despedida en la casita; Lisbeth se asomó a la puerta en compañía de Adam, forzando sus cansados ojos para divisar a Seth y a Dinah mientras ascendían por la pendiente opuesta.

—Siento mucho verla por última vez —dijo la anciana a su hijo cuando ambos volvían a entrar en la casa—. Con gusto hubiese tenido a esta joven a mi lado hasta la muerte, cuando vaya a reunirme con mi pobre marido. Así, el fin de mi vida habría sido más fácil… La pobrecilla habla de forma muy cariñosa y se mueve por la casa sin hacer ruido. Y hasta creo que el dibujo que hay en tu Biblia nueva, que representa un ángel sentado en una enorme piedra junto a una tumba, se parece a Dinah. ¡Ojalá tuviese una hija como ella! Pero los hombres son tan tontos que no aprovechan estas ocasiones.

—Bueno, madre. Espero que esa joven llegará a ser tu hija, porque Seth la quiere y creo que, con el tiempo, ella le corresponderá.

—¿Por qué te haces ilusiones? Ella no quiere a Seth. Ahora mismo se dispone a ir a vivir a treinta kilómetros de distancia. Y eso no contribuirá a que se aficione a la compañía de mi hijo… Parece mentira que con tantos números que conoces no sepas calcular estas cosas.

—Los números, madre, nos cuentan muchas cosas, y muy mal nos iría sin ellos; pero no pueden darnos a entender los sentimientos de las personas. Los cálculos son un trabajo muy bonito, pero dejando eso aparte, Seth es un muchacho excelente, lleno de sentido común y, además, es guapo. Y por si fuera poco, tiene las mismas ideas que Dinah, así que merece conquistarla, aunque no puede negarse que esa muchacha lo merece todo. No es frecuente encontrar mujeres semejantes.

—Tú siempre defendiendo a tu hermano. Desde que erais pequeños no has hecho otra cosa, y en cualquier momento estás dispuesto a darle la mitad de cuanto poseas. ¿Por qué debería casarse Seth, si no tiene más de veintitrés años? Creo que lo mejor sería que aprendiese algunas cosas más y ahorrase algo. Y en cuanto a merecer a esa chica, piensa que ella tiene dos años más que él, o sea casi tu misma edad. Aunque los jóvenes no os fijáis en estas cosas, sino que os enamoráis de la primera mujer que se presenta.

Para la mente femenina, todas las cosas que podrían ser adquieren un encanto especial al compararlas con las que son y, puesto que Adam no pensaba casarse con Dinah, Lisbeth sentía cierta irritación por el particular, irritación que también habría experimentado si Dinah fuera el objeto del amor de Adam y, por consiguiente, Mary Burge, así como la probable asociación de Adam con su patrono, quedaran fuera de juego, asociación que tampoco se daría en caso de que el joven se casara con Hetty.

Eran más de las ocho y media cuando Adam y su madre hablaban de este modo; diez minutos más tarde, al llegar Hetty al recodo del camino que conducía a la puerta de la granja, vio a Dinah y a Seth que se acercaban a ella desde la dirección opuesta y esperó para que la alcanzasen. Dinah y a Seth también caminaban despacio, pues la joven se esforzaba en dirigir a Seth palabras de consuelo y de aliento en el momento de la despedida. Pero al ver a Hetty se detuvieron y se estrecharon las manos. Seth regresó a su casa y Dinah continuó sola.

—Seth Bede habría querido hablar contigo, querida mía —dijo la joven al llegar junto a Hetty—. Pero esta noche el pobre está muy preocupado.

Hetty respondió con una luminosa sonrisa, como si no acabara de comprender lo que le decían; y creaban un extraño contraste aquella joven resplandeciente y consciente de su belleza junto al rostro compasivo y tranquilo de Dinah, con su mirada franca que no revelaba poseer secretos propios, sino un

corazón lleno de compasión y bondad para todo el mundo. A Hetty le gustaba Dinah como ninguna otra mujer, pues era imposible abrigar otros sentimientos acerca de una joven que siempre pronunciaba una palabra bondadosa cuando la regañaba su tía y que en cualquier momento estaba dispuesta a quitarle a Totty de los brazos, a la pequeña e inaguantable Totty, que había conquistado el corazón de todos y en la que Hetty no veía nada de particular. Durante su estancia en Hall Farm, Dinah jamás dirigió a Hetty una palabra de desaprobación o de censura; siempre le hablaba en tono serio, pero a Hetty no le importaba, pues jamás prestaba atención. Fuera lo que fuese lo que le dijera Dinah, le acariciaba luego la mejilla y siempre estaba dispuesta a hacer algún remiendo por ella. Dinah era un verdadero enigma para Hetty; la veía del mismo modo que uno imaginaría que un pajarito capaz sólo de revolotear de una rama a otra miraría a una golondrina o a la alondra que sube en línea recta hacia el cielo; pero no se preocupaba por resolver tales enigmas, así como no le importaba nada conocer el significado de los grabados del *Progress Pilgrim's*
o de la vieja Biblia con que Marty y Tommy la asediaban los domingos.

Dinah le tomó entonces la mano y la puso alrededor de su propio brazo.

—Esta noche pareces ser muy feliz, querida niña —dijo—. Te recordaré mucho cuando esté en Snowfield y pensaré en tu rostro como está ahora. Es raro pero algunas veces, cuando estoy completamente sola, sentada en mi habitación con los ojos cerrados o paseando por las montañas, me parece volver a ver a las personas a quienes he conocido, aunque sólo haya sido por unos días, y de nuevo oigo sus voces y las veo mirar y moverse de tal forma que hasta tengo la ilusión de que podría tocarlas. Y entonces mi corazón se siente atraído por ellas y me parece que su suerte es la mía y me consuela ofrecerla al Señor y descansar en su amor tanto en beneficio de ellas como en el mío propio. Así que estoy segura de que tu imagen también se me presentará.

Dinah hizo una corta pausa en la que Hetty no pronunció una sola palabra.

—Ayer noche y hoy he pasado unas horas muy agradables —continuó diciendo Dinah— observando a dos hijos tan buenos como Adam y Seth Bede. Se muestran muy tiernos y solícitos por su anciana madre. Esta me ha contado todo lo que Adam ha llegado a hacer por su familia durante los últimos años para ayudar a su padre y a su hermano. Es maravilloso el espíritu de sabiduría y de conocimiento que posee, y cómo siempre está dispuesto a emplearlo en beneficio de los débiles; además estoy segura de que también tiene un espíritu amante. Muchas veces, entre mi propia gente de Snowfield, he podido observar que los hombres fuertes y hábiles suelen ser los más cariñosos con las mujeres y con los niños. Y es muy agradable verles llevar en brazos a los pequeños como si no pesaran más que pajaritos. Y los niños suelen preferir los brazos de los hombres vigorosos. Estoy segura de que Adam Bede será así. ¿No crees, Hetty?

—Sí —contestó ésta, pero su mente había estado en el bosque mientras Dinah hablaba y le habría sido difícil explicar a qué había contestado afirmativamente.

Dinah observó que la joven no parecía inclinada a hablar, pero ya no quedaba tiempo para decir muchas cosas, pues habían llegado a la entrada del patio.

Aun no había anochecido por completo, al oeste el cielo estaba rojizo y sólo en dirección opuesta se veían algunas estrellas que parecían esforzarse en acentuar su brillo. El patio de la granja se hallaba aún levemente iluminado y, salvo las coces que los caballos daban en la cuadra, no se oía ningún ruido. Habrían pasado veinte minutos desde la puesta del sol. Las gallinas se encaramaron en sus perchas y el *bull-dog* se tendió sobre la paja que había en el exterior de la perrera, con el *terrier* negro y pardo a su lado. Al abrirse el portón, empezaron a ladrar como buenos vigilantes, aun antes de averiguar la razón de aquel ruido.

Sus ladridos produjeron efecto en la casa, pues cuando Dinah y Hetty se acercaban, la puerta principal quedó ocupada por una majestuosa figura de rostro rojizo y ojos negros, de expresión perspicaz y, en caso necesario, desdeñosa en los días de mercado, pero que a la sazón tenía el aspecto placentero de quien ha terminado de cenar. Es muy sabido el caso de que los profesores que han demostrado ser capaces de dirigir acerbas críticas contra algunos de sus colegas son, a veces, hombres indulgentes en su vida privada; y he oído contar de un hombre muy instruido que con paciencia mecía con la mano izquierda a dos niños gemelos en su cuna, mientras que con la derecha subrayaba los sarcasmos que dirigía a un opositor que demostró una absoluta ignorancia del idioma hebreo. Hay que perdonar las debilidades y los errores que nos son propios; pero el hombre que adopta una actitud equivocada sobre el importante asunto de un examen de hebreo, debe ser tratado como enemigo de su raza. En Martin Poyser se observaban las mismas contradicciones; sus cualidades eran tan excelentes que se mostró más bondadoso y respetuoso que nunca con su anciano padre en cuanto éste le hubo hecho donación de todas sus propiedades, y nadie juzgaba a sus vecinos en sus asuntos personales con sentimientos más caritativos que él; pero con respecto a Luke Britton, cuyas tierras no estaban bien cuidadas, que no conocía siquiera los rudimentos del arte de poner un

seto o de excavar una zanja, y que apenas daba muestras de buen juicio al comprar el ganado en invierno, Martin Poyser era tan duro e implacable como el viento del nordeste. Luke Britton no podía hacer una observación, ni siquiera acerca del tiempo, sin que Martin Poyser descubriese en ella la misma ignorancia general que se observaba en sus labores agrícolas. Le molestaba ver a aquel individuo en el acto de llevarse a la boca el jarro de peltre en el bar del Royal George los días de mercado, y su sola visión al otro lado del camino hacía asomar a sus ojos negros una expresión crítica, distinta por completo de la mirada paternal que dirigía a sus dos sobrinas mientras éstas se acercaban a la puerta. El señor Poyser había fumado ya su pipa de la tarde y, a la sazón, llevaba las manos en los bolsillos, como única distracción de un hombre que continúa en pie después de terminadas las tareas del día.

—¡Caramba, hijas, qué tarde llegáis esta noche! —dijo cuando las jóvenes estuvieron en la puertecilla de la empalizada—. ¿Cómo estaba la vieja Bede, Dinah? ¿Ha sentido mucho la muerte de su marido? La pobre lo ha pasado muy mal estos últimos cinco años.

—Ha sentido mucho su muerte —contestó Dinah—, pero hoy parecía algo consolada. Su hijo Adam ha permanecido todo el día en casa, ocupado en construir el ataúd de su padre, pues ella quiso que se hiciera allí. Hemos pasado casi todo el día hablando. Es una mujer bondadosa, aunque de carácter inquieto y temeroso, sin duda a causa de las desgracias sufridas. ¡Ojalá pudiese pasar más tranquila sus últimos años!

—Adam la ayudará —dijo el señor Poyser—. No hay peligro de que se porte mal con su madre, y apostaría la cabeza a que será un buen hijo. ¿Ha dicho si vendrá a vernos pronto? Pero entrad, entrad —añadió, dejándoles paso—. No os quedéis en la puerta.

Las altas construcciones que rodeaban el patio limitaban considerablemente el espacio del cielo visible por la gran ventana que había en la estancias en que entraron.

La señora Poyser, que estaba allí sentada en una mecedora, se esforzaba en dormir a Totty. Pero la niña no parecía dispuesta a hacerlo y cuando entraron sus primas se incorporó, con sus enrojecidas mejillas más redondas que nunca por estar rodeadas por el gorrito de dormir.

En el gran sillón de mimbre a la izquierda de la chimenea estaba sentado el viejo Martin Poyser, imagen arrugada y descolorida de su majestuoso y bien plantado hijo; la cabeza inclinada un poco hacia adelante y los codos echados hacia atrás, de modo que todo el antebrazo descansaba en el brazo del sillón. Sobre las rodillas tenía un pañuelo azul extendido, como siempre que estaba dentro de la casa, pues fuera se lo ponía en la cabeza; y observaba lo que ocurría con el interés distante que sienten los viejos saludables que ya se consideran desligados de sus sucesores y que se dedican a buscar alfileres por el suelo y observan con tenacidad la danza de las llamas en la chimenea y el recorrido de los rayos del sol sobre la pared, o cuentan las losas del suelo y observan las manecillas del reloj y se complacen en descubrir un ritmo en su tictac.

—¿Qué horas son ésas de llegar a casa, Hetty? —preguntó la señora Poyser—. Hazme el favor de mirar el reloj. Son casi las nueve y media. Como ya es muy tarde, he mandado a las muchachas a la cama, porque se levantan a las cuatro y media y han de llenar de agua las botellas de los segadores y luego ocuparse de amasar. Y aquí tengo a esta dichosa niña con fiebre y tan despierta como si fuese de día. Sólo vuestro tío ha podido ayudarme a darle la medicina, y ha resultado difícil hacérsela tomar pues se ha derramado más de la mitad en la camisita. Ya veremos si le hace daño haber tragado una cantidad mayor. Pero a nadie le importa ayudar a los demás, y todo el mundo disfruta paseando, aunque tenga algo que hacer.

—Por mi parte, he salido antes de las ocho, tía —contestó Hetty enfadada y moviendo despectivamente la cabeza—. Pero este reloj va muy adelantado y marca una hora distinta que el del cazadero; así que no hay modo de saber a qué hora he llegado.

—Así que querrías poner el reloj en hora con el de los señores, ¿no? Y luego te gustaría permanecer despierta por la noche, gastando bujías, y despertarte cuando el sol te echara de la cama. Creo que no es ésta la primera vez que el reloj se adelanta.

La verdad es que Hetty había olvidado la diferencia entre los relojes cuando dijo al capitán Donnithorne que saldría a las ocho, y eso, unido a la lentitud con que hizo el camino, contribuyó a que llegase media hora más tarde que de costumbre. Pero entonces la atención de su tía se vio solicitada por Totty, quien al observar que la llegada de sus primas no le proporcionaba ninguna satisfacción particular, empezó a llamar a su madre de un modo explosivo.

—Bueno, hijita mía. Mamá está contigo y no te dejará. Totty será buena y se dormirá ahora —dijo la señora Poyser reclinándose en el respaldo y meciéndose en el sillón, al mismo tiempo que forzaba a Totty a que apoyara la cabeza en su propio cuerpo. Pero la niña gritó aún más, exclamando:

—No quiero mecerme.

En vista de ello, la madre, con la maravillosa paciencia que el amor da al carácter más vivo del mundo, volvió a enderezarse, apoyó la mejilla sobre el gorrito de la niña, la besó y no volvió a reñir a Hetty.

—Ven, Hetty —dijo Martin Poyser con amabilidad—. Encontrarás la cena en la despensa, pues ya han quitado la mesa. Luego cogerás un rato la niña mientras tu tía se desnuda, porque ya sabes que no quiere acostarse sin su madre. Y tú también, Dinah, podrás comer un poco, porque no creo que hayas cenado allí.

—No, muchas gracias, tío —contestó Dinah—. He comido antes de salir; la señora Bede me ha preparado la cena.

—Pues yo no quiero cenar —dijo Hetty quitándose el sombrero—. Y si mi tía me necesita, puedo encargarme ya de la niña.

—No digas tonterías —replicó el señor Poyser—. ¿Crees que podrás vivir sin comer y alimentarte con las cintas rojas que llevas en la cabeza? Vete a cenar enseguida. Encontrarás un poco de pudín frío, como a ti te gusta.

Hetty obedeció en silencio, encaminándose a la despensa, y el señor Poyser continuó hablando con Dinah.

—Siéntate, querida, y ponte cómoda. Estoy seguro de que la vieja se alegró de verte y de que te quedaras con ella.

—Parecía desear que me quedase para siempre. Sus hijos me dijeron que, por regla general, no acoge bien a las muchachas, y hasta creo que en el primer momento se enfadó al verme.

—Mal asunto cuando los viejos no reciben bien a los jóvenes —dijo el anciano Martin inclinando aún más la cabeza y dispuesto al parecer a contar los ladrillos.

—Sí. Todos hemos sido jóvenes —dijo la señora Poyser—, y es mala señal que nos irrite ver a una persona de pocos años, porque eso indica que no se ha sido feliz en la primera parte de la vida.

—Pero las mujeres ancianas han de acostumbrarse a vivir con las jóvenes —dijo Martin—. Y la señora Bede ya puede ir haciéndose a esta idea, porque no creo que sus hijos se queden solteros para darle gusto. Eso no sería razonable. Ni los jóvenes ni los viejos han de querer que siempre se haga su voluntad. Y lo que es bueno para uno, al fin lo es también para todos. No soy partidario de que los jóvenes se casen antes de saber lo que es el mundo; pero al final han de hacerlo.

—Lo cierto —dijo la señora Poyser— es que, cuando se cena tarde, poca carne se encuentra en el plato. Y, como ya está fría, acabamos por no comerla, sin advertir que el mal no está en la carne, sino en nosotros mismos.

Hetty, que volvía de la despensa, apareció diciendo:

—Si quiere, tía, puedo coger a Totty.

—Sí, Rachel —dijo el señor Poyser al notar la vacilación de su esposa, pues Totty parecía estar a punto de dormirse—. Mejor será que Hetty la suba y la acueste mientras tú te desnudas. Estás cansada y ya deberías haberte acostado. No vaya a ser que vuelvas a sentir dolor en el costado.

—Bueno. Si la niña quiere, Hetty puede encargarse de ella.

Hetty se acercó a la mecedora y se quedó de pie, sin su sonrisa habitual y sin hacer el menor esfuerzo para atraer a la niña, limitándose a esperar a que se la entregasen.

—¿Quieres ir con la prima Hetty, reina mía, mientras mamá va a acostarse? Entonces Totty se acostará con mamá y dormirá toda la noche.

Antes de que su madre hubiese terminado de hablar, Totty dio su respuesta con claridad, frunciendo el ceño, mordiéndose el labio inferior y golpeando con todas sus fuerzas el brazo de Hetty. Luego, sin hablar, volvió a apoyarse en el cuerpo de su madre.

—¿De modo —preguntó el señor Poyser mientras Hetty se quedaba inmóvil— que no quieres ir con la primita? Eso lo hacen las niñas, pero Totty ya es una mujercita.

—No la convencerás —declaró la señora Poyser—. Cuando no está buena no quiere saber nada de Hetty. Tal vez querrá ir con Dinah.

Ésta, que se había quitado el gorro y el chal, había permanecido sentada y en segundo término, deseosa de no interponerse entre la niña y Hetty. Pero en ese momento avanzó con los brazos tendidos y dijo:

—Ven, querida Totty, que Dinah te llevará arriba con mamá. ¡Pobrecita mamá! Está muy cansada y quiere acostarse.

Totty volvió el rostro hacia la joven, la contempló un instante, y luego, incorporándose, le tendió los brazos, permitiendo que Dinah la separase de su madre. Hetty se alejó sin demostrar ningún malhumor, y tomando el sombrero que había dejado sobre la mesa, se quedó esperando con expresión indiferente por si le mandaban algo más.

—Puedes cerrar la puerta, Martin; Alick hace rato que ha llegado —dijo la señora Poyser poniéndose en pie con expresión de alivio—. Tráeme las cerillas, Hetty; quiero encender la lamparilla en mi dormitorio. Venga, padre.

Empezaron a resonar las trancas de las puertas de la casa y el viejo Martin se dispuso a acostarse, recogiendo su pañuelo azul y tomando su brillante y nudoso bastón de nogal, que estaba apoyado en el rincón. La señora Poyser salió entonces de la cocina seguida por el abuelo y por Dinah, que llevaba a Totty en brazos. Todos se acostaban al anochecer, como los pájaros. La señora Poyser se asomó, al pasar, por la estancia en la que dormían los dos niños, y pudo ver sus rojas mejillas sobre la almohada y oír por un momento su respiración.

—Vamos, Hetty, acuéstate —dijo el señor Poyser en tono cariñoso, mientras él mismo se disponía a hacerlo—. Es mejor que no te acuestes tarde, pues tu tía está de malhumor. Buenas noches, sobrina.

—Buenas noches.

XV

Los dos dormitorios

Hetty y Dinah dormían en el segundo piso, en habitaciones contiguas, muy pobremente amuebladas y sin postigos para protegerse de la luz exterior, que en ese momento empezaba a recobrar intensidad gracias a la salida de la luna. De este modo Hetty pudo ir de un lado a otro de la estancia y desnudarse con toda comodidad. Podía ver perfectamente los clavos de los que colgaba su sombrero y su traje, así como las cabezas de los alfileres clavados en la almohadilla roja; igualmente podía contemplar su propia imagen en el espejo, aunque eso era innecesario teniendo en cuenta que sólo debía cepillarse el cabello y ponerse el gorro de dormir. Aquel viejo espejo era muy raro y Hetty siempre se sentía incómoda al vestirse. En sus buenos tiempos debió de ser un buen espejo y, probablemente, lo había comprado algún miembro de la familia Poyser, un cuarto de siglo antes, aprovechando alguna subasta pública de los muebles de una familia distinguida. Aún hoy, cualquier comerciante podría sentirse interesado por adquirirlo. Poseía una base sólida de caoba y estaba bien provisto de cajones, que se no se abrían sino de modo violento y haciendo saltar el contenido al suelo; éste se ocultaba en los rincones más lejanos de tal modo que casi eran inútiles las pesquisas para volver a encontrarlo. El espejo tenía una palmatoria de bronce a cada lado, y eso acababa de darle un aspecto aristocrático. Pero a Hetty no le gustaba aquel espejo, pues la luna tenía numerosas manchas que no podía quitar ni siquiera frotando con fuerza y además porque en vez de inclinarse hacia atrás y hacia adelante estaba fijo en posición perpendicular, de modo que la joven sólo podía contemplar su cabeza y su cuello cuando se sentaba en una silla baja frente al tocador. Este último no merecía tal nombre, pues consistía únicamente en una cómoda muy pequeña que resultaba muy poco apropiada para sentarse frente ella, ya que las enormes asas de bronce de los cajones hacían daño en las rodillas y no permitían acercarse al espejo. Pero los devotos no han de mirar los inconvenientes que les impiden cumplir sus deberes religiosos, y Hetty, aquella noche, estaba más inclinada que nunca a dedicarse a su especial adoración habitual.

Después de quitarse el traje y el pañuelo blanco, tomó la llave que había en un bolsillo de su falda y abrió uno de los cajones inferiores de la cómoda para sacar dos cabos de vela comprados en secreto en Treddleston; a continuación los ajustó en las palmatorias de bronce. Hecho esto, tomó una caja de cerillas y encendió las velas, y, por último, tomó un espejo con marco rojo de un chelín y sin manchas, en el que se contempló en cuanto se hubo sentado. Se miró sonriendo, volvió la cabeza a un lado y luego, dejándolo sobre la cómoda, tomó el cepillo y el peine de uno de sus cajones superiores. Se soltaría el cabello para parecerse al dibujo de una dama que había visto en el tocador de la señorita Lydia Donnithorne. Pronto cayó sobre su cuello una cascada de cabellos. No eran recios y ondulados, sino suaves y sedosos, y aprovechaban la menor oportunidad para formar delicados rizos. Ella lo peinó todo hacia atrás para parecerse al dibujo y formar una sombría cortina que diese relieve a su redondo y blanco cuello. Luego, dejando el cepillo y el peine, volvió a mirarse cruzando los brazos y adoptando la postura de aquel dibujo. Y hasta el mismo espejo moteado tuvo que reflejar una hermosa imagen, cuyo único detalle desfavorable sería el de no mostrar un corsé de satén blanco, según suelen llevarlo las heroínas de novela, sino de un tejido de algodón de color verde oscuro.

Sí. Era muy hermosa. El capitán Donnithorne lo creía así. Más herniosa que cualquier otra muchacha de Hayslope y que cualquiera de las damas que visitaron el cazadero. En realidad, éstas eran tan distinguidas como viejas y feas. Y más hermosa también que la señora Eacon, la hija del molinero, que era considerada la mayor belleza de Treddleston. Y Hetty se miraba aquella noche experimentando una sensación distinta de

la que hasta entonces había sentido. Había allí un espectador invisible, cuyas ojos estaban fijos en ella como la luz del sol lo está sobre las flores. La suave voz de aquel hombre repetía las mismas cosas que la joven oyó en el bosque. Su brazo la mantenía cogida por la cintura y a la joven le parecía aún perceptible el delicado aroma de su cabello. La mujer más vanidosa no llega a tener una conciencia clara de su propia belleza hasta que se ve amada por el hombre que, en justa correspondencia, hace vibrar su pasión.

Pero Hetty parecía estar persuadida de que le faltaba algo, porque se puso en pie y tomó de un armarito un chal de encaje negro y un par de pendientes del cajón sagrado en que ocultaba las velas. Era un chal muy antiguo, bastante roto; pero, de todos modos, sería un agradable marco para sus hombros y haría resaltar la blancura de la parte superior de su brazo. Además, se quitó los pequeños pendientes que llevaba (¡oh, cuánto le riñó su tía por haberse hecho agujerear las orejas!) y se puso otros de mayor tamaño; eran de metal dorado y estaban adornados con cristales, pero si uno ignoraba los materiales, tenían el mismo aspecto que los de las damas. Y así, volvió a sentarse, adornada con los largos pendientes y por el encaje negro sobre los hombros. Entonces se miró los brazos y pensó que, sin duda, no existían otros tan bonitos, pues eran blancos y redondos y tenían hoyuelos que armonizaban con los de sus mejillas; pero hacia la muñeca observó, disgustada, que la piel estaba enrojecida a causa de batir la manteca y de llevar a cabo otros trabajos en que nunca se ocupaban las damas.

El capitán Donnithorne no querría, sin duda, que ella continuase trabajando; preferiría verla bien vestida, con medias finas y bonitos zapatos. Era indudable que él la quería mucho, pues nadie hasta entonces la había abrazado por el talle como él, y nadie la había besado de aquel modo. Era casi seguro que querría casarse con ella y convertirla en una dama. Aunque apenas se atrevía a confesarse esa idea, se preguntaba cómo podría ocurrir semejante cosa. Tal vez se casaran en secreto, como el señor James, el ayudante del doctor, se había casado con la sobrina de éste, de modo que, durante mucho tiempo, nadie se enteró de ello hasta que ya fue inútil enfadarse por esa causa. El doctor había contado toda la historia a su tía en presencia de Hetty. ¡Oh! Era imposible figurarse lo que ocurriría en el porvenir. El capitán Donnithorne debía de saberlo. Era un gran caballero que siempre obraba según su capricho y podía hacer cuanto se le antojara. Y las cosas no podían continuar como hasta entonces. Tal vez algún día llegaría a ser una gran dama que pasearía en su propio coche, se pondría trajes de brocado antes de cenar, con plumas en el cabello y con una cola muy larga que arrastraría por el suelo, como la señorita Lydia y lady Dacey, a quienes vio una noche entrar en el comedor mirando a través de una ventanilla redonda del vestíbulo. Pero por otro lado, ella no sería vieja y fea como la señorita Lydia, ni tan gorda como lady Dacey, sino muy hermosa, y, además, se peinaría el cabello de mil modos diferentes. Unas veces llevaría un traje rosa y en otras ocasiones uno blanco, pues en realidad no acababa de decidirse entre estos dos colores. Y Mary Burge y todo el mundo la vería, quizás, en su coche o, mejor dicho, oirían hablar de ella, pues era imposible imaginar que estas cosas sucediesen en Hayslope y a poca distancia de su tía. Al pensar en todo este esplendor, Hetty se puso en pie y el encaje se enganchó en la punta del espejo de marco rojo y lo hizo caer al suelo. Pero estaba demasiado ocupada por su visión para recogerlo. Después de un sobresalto momentáneo empezó a andar con pasos majestuosos de un lado a otro de la estancia, con su falda de colores, el antiguo encaje negro sobre los hombros y las orejas adornadas por los grandes pendientes.

¡Qué hermosa estaba aquella niña con tan extraña vestimenta! Habría sido la locura más comprensible del mundo enamorarse de ella. En su rostro y en su figura había redondeces propias de la infancia; tenía el cuello y las orejas flanqueados del hermoso cabello ensortijado; los grandes ojos negros adornados de largas pestañas, hacían suponer que un duende juguetón estaba aprisionado en ellos.

¡Ah! ¡Qué dichoso es el hombre que puede conquistar a una mujer tan bella como Hetty! ¡Cómo envidian todos al novio que acude al festín nupcial y lleva cogida del brazo a una mujercita como ella, vestida de encaje blanco y de flores de azahar! ¡Qué hermosísima, suave y delicada mujercita! Su corazón debe de ser afable y su carácter atractivo y amable. En caso de que surja algún disgusto entre ellos, la culpa será, sin duda, del marido, pues es evidente que podría hacer de su mujer lo que quisiera. Y el mismo novio lo cree así. La pequeña estaría tan encariñada con él, sus pequeñas vanidades serían tan encantadoras, que él no se atrevería a contrariarla en lo más mínimo; aquellas miradas y aquellos movimientos de gatita, son, precisamente, en tales circunstancias, lo que necesita un hombre para convertir la tierra en un paraíso. Todo hombre, en tales circunstancias, está persuadido de ser un gran fisonomista. Le consta que la naturaleza tiene un lenguaje propio, en el que emplea la verdad, y él se cree iniciado en tal lenguaje. La naturaleza le ha revelado el carácter de su esposa en esas líneas exquisitas de las mejillas, de los labios y de la barbilla; en esos párpados delicados como los pétalos de una flor, y en las profundidades líquidas de aquellos ojos. ¡Que bellos serán los hijos de aquella mujer! Ella misma es una niña, de modo que los pequeños parecerán los capullos que rodean a la flor de pétalos abiertos; y el marido contemplará aquel

cuadro sonriendo, benigno, dispuesto, cuando le parezca bien, a retirarse al santuario de su buen juicio, al que su esposa mirará con reverencia, sin atreverse a levantar la cortina. Aquella boda es semejante a las que se celebraban en la edad de oro, cuando los hombres eran sensatos y majestuosos, y las mujeres, amables y amorosas.

Esto último más o menos pensaba Adam Bede de la linda Hetty, aunque expresaba sus pensamientos con palabras diferentes. Cuando ella le acogía con fría vanidad, él se decía: «Eso es porque todavía no me quiere bastante». Y estaba persuadido de que su amor, cuando ella se lo atorgase, sería la cosa más preciosa que un hombre pudiese poseer en la tierra. Y antes de que el lector menosprecie a Adam por su falta de penetración, convendrá que se pregunte si alguna vez se sintió predispuesto a pensar mal de alguna mujer hermosa, si alguna vez pudo, de no tener cruelísimas pruebas para ello, pensar mal de la bellísima mujer que le conquistó. No, las personas que aman no piensan mal del objeto amado, y hasta llegan a irritarse con quien se atreve a hacer una insinuación malévola.

Arthur Donnithorne tenía las mismas ideas con respecto a Hetty, pues creía que era una joven muy buena, afectuosa y adorable. El hombre que se enamora siempre cree que el objeto de su amor es la criatura más afectuosa del mundo; y si por azar piensa en el futuro, es probable que se imagine siendo muy tierno con ella, pues la pobrecilla estará enamoradísima de él. Piensa que Dios hizo así a esas queridas mujeres y es una buena providencia en el caso de enfermedad.

En cualquier caso, creo que los más prudentes de entre nosotros se dejan engañar así algunas veces, y es preciso pensar de la gente a la vez mejor y peor de lo que merece. La naturaleza tiene realmente su propio lenguaje y no es mentirosa; pero todavía no conocemos las complicaciones de su sintaxis y al leer apresuradamente podemos entender una cosa distinta por completo de lo que dice en realidad. Las pestañas largas y negras son realmente muy bellas, y es difícil que exista algo más delicado. Resulta difícil no imaginarse que debajo de unos ojos hermosos, provistos de largas pestañas, no haya un alma noble y tierna; pero la experiencia me ha demostrado que, en realidad, la mujer que posea estos bellos detalles puede tener un carácter falso y sentirse inclinada a la mentira, al fingimiento e incluso ser estúpida. Pero si como reacción recurro a unos ojos de pez, puedo sorprenderme al hallar un resultado similar. Y así, se acaba sospechando que no existe relación directa entre las pestañas y la moral, o que las pestañas pueden expresar el carácter de la abuela de uno, cosa que nos importa muy poco.

Seguramente no existían pestañas más hermosas que las de Hetty, y cuando paseaba majestuosamente por la habitación y miraba sus hombros adornados por el antiguo encaje negro, la sombra de aquéllas hacía resaltar la perfección de sus sonrosadas mejillas. Aquellas pestañas no eran más que vagas y mal definidas imágenes del futuro que podía imaginar su limitada experiencia; pero en cada uno de aquellos cuadros ella era la figura central y aparecía magníficamente vestida. El capitán Donnithorne se hallaba muy cerca, rodeándole el talle con el brazo y, quizás, besándola; además, todo el mundo la admiraba y la envidiaba, en especial Mary Burge, cuyo traje negro estampado parecía despreciable al lado del resplandeciente vestido de Hetty. ¿Y había algún recuerdo, dulce o triste, relacionado con aquel sueño del futuro, algún sentimiento amoroso por sus segundos padres, por los niños que ayudó a criar, por una joven compañera, por un animal favorito o incluso por una reliquia de su propia infancia? Nada de eso. Hay plantas que apenas tienen raíces y es posible arrancarlas del lugar de su nacimiento, ya sea una roca o una pared, para dejarlas en el tiesto destinado a contener una planta de adorno, y no por eso dejan de vivir o de prosperar. Hetty podía haber arrojado a su espalda toda su vida pasada con la seguridad de que no la echaría de menos y que no volvería a recordarla. Creo que la antigua casa no le inspiraba ninguna emoción, que no le gustaba la escala de Jacob ni la larga fila de malvas del jardín más que otras flores, y quizás ni siquiera tanto. Era maravilloso ver lo poco que le importaba cuidar de su tío, que siempre fue un cariñoso padre con ella. Apenas se acordaba de ofrecerle la pipa en el momento oportuno, sin que hubiese necesidad de advertírselo, a no ser que tuviesen alguna visita, pues eso le proporcionaba la oportunidad de hacerse admirar. Hetty no llegaba a comprender que las personas maduras pudieran inspirar algún afecto. Y en cuanto a esos niños insoportables, Marty, Tommy y Totty, no eran sino el mayor engorro de su vida, tan malos y pesados como zumbadores insectos que asedian en un día caluroso cuando más tranquilidad se necesita. Marty, el mayor, era un niño de pecho cuando la joven llegó a la granja; sus hermanos mayores habían muerto, así que Hetty tuvo que cuidar de los tres, uno tras otro, mientras aprendían a andar a su lado, en el parque, o jugando a su alrededor en los días lluviosos y en las habitaciones desocupadas de la enorme casa. Por fortuna, ahora los dos muchachos estaban ya criados, pero Totty la molestaba durante todo el día y mucho más que sus hermanos, ya que por ser niña todos la mimaban más. Y luego el remiendo y el arreglo de sus ropas no se acababa nunca. Hetty se habría alegrado de no volver a ver un niño en su vida. Eran mucho más fastidiosos que los cabritos que debe cuidar el pastor en la época de la cría, pues éste, al menos, se ve libre de ellos

más o menos pronto. En cuanto a los pollitos y a los pavos, Hetty no se habría molestado en oír hablar de la cría si su tía no le hubiese prometido que si cuidaba de ellos le regalaría un miembro de cada nidada. Las redondas bolitas llenas de plumas que contemplaban el mundo bajo el amparo del ala de su madre jamás proporcionaron ningún placer a Hetty. No era ésa la belleza que le gustaba, sino la de las cosas nuevas que podía comprar para sí misma en la feria de Treddleston con el dinero que obtenía de las alas. Y, sin embargo, aquella jovencita era tan encantadora y tan simpática, y parecía tan buena al echar la comida a las gallinas, que nadie habría sospechado la dureza de su corazón. Molly, la criada, con toda su nariz respingona y su quijada saliente, tenía, en realidad, sentimientos mucho más tiernos y, como decía la señora Poyser, era una joya para cuidar del gallinero, si bien su estólido rostro no exteriorizaba en absoluto sus buenas cualidades.

Generalmente los ojos de las mujeres descubren las deficiencias morales ocultas bajo la capa de la belleza, y así, no es de extrañar que la señora Poyser, con su agudeza y dotes de observación, se hubiese formado una idea bastante exacta de lo que podía esperarse de Hetty. Y en los momentos de indignación había hablado de ello con su marido, sin morderse la lengua.

—No vale mucho más que un pavo real, y estoy segura de que se hincharía y extendería la cola a la luz del sol aunque se muriesen todos los habitantes de la parroquia. No hay nada que la impresione, ni siquiera reaccionó cuando le conté que Totty se había caído al abrevadero. ¡Pobrecilla! La encontramos con los zapatitos hundidos en el barro y a punto de caerse dentro de la pila del agua. Pero Hetty no hizo ningún caso, a pesar de que ha cuidado de la niña desde que nació. Tiene el corazón de piedra.

—No, no —replicó el señor Poyser—. No debes juzgar a Hetty con tanta dureza. Las muchachas jóvenes son como el grano verde. Más adelante servirán para comer, pero de momento no pueden utilizarse para nada. Ya verás cómo Hetty cambia en cuanto se case y tenga hijos.

—No es que yo quiera tratarla con dureza. Es muy hábil y cuando quiere trabaja muy bien. Y para batir y preparar la manteca no tiene rival. Por mi parte he hecho por ella todo cuanto me ha sido posible. Le he enseñado a hacer todos los trabajos de la casa, y no he dejado de reconvenirla y aleccionarla siempre que ha sido necesario, a pesar de que bastante tengo con cuidar de tres muchachas y vigilándolo todo. Créeme que a veces no parece sino que estás asando carne en tres fuegos distintos y cuando vas a ocuparte de una se te quema la otra.

Hetty temía a su tía y procuraba disimular ante ella su vanidad mientras que no le resultase un sacrificio muy duro. No podía resistir el deseo de gastar el dinero en cosas bonitas, a pesar de la desaprobación de la señora Poyser; pero se habría muerto de vergüenza y del susto si en aquel momento su tía hubiese abierto la puerta y la viera con las velas encendidas y paseando de un lado a otro con los pendientes y el chal de encaje negro. Para evitar la posibilidad de esa sorpresa, solía cerrar la puerta, y aquella noche tampoco olvidó tal precaución. Y había hecho bien, pues de repente oyó una ligera llamada que la sacó de su admirativo ensimismamiento; luego se apresuró a apagar los cabos de vela y a guardarlos en el cajón; aunque no se atrevió a entretenerse quitándose los pendientes, dejó caer al suelo el chal antes de que se repitiese la llamada. Si dejamos por un momento de ocuparnos de Hetty, pronto averiguaremos la causa de aquella interrupción. Volveremos a Dinah en el instante en que entregó a Totty a los brazos de su madre y subió a su cuarto, contiguo al de Hetty.

A Dinah le gustaba mucho la ventana de su dormitorio. Como se hallaba en el segundo piso de la casa, veía desde ella un magnífico y extenso panorama. El grueso de la pared formaba un asiento de un metro de ancho, en el cual podía poner la silla. Y lo primero que hizo al entrar en la habitación fue sentarse allí para contemplar los tranquilos campos; detrás asomaba la luna por encima de una fila de olmos. Le gustaba tanto contemplar los pastos donde descansaban las vacas, y el prado con la hierba a medio segar y cruzado por líneas plateadas, que la entristecía saber que sólo le quedaba otra noche en aquella casa. Pero también los yermos de Snowfield tenían encantos para ella; pensó en todas las personas queridas de aquella rica región que en adelante recordaría con inmenso placer. Pensó en las luchas y en las fatigas que les esperaban en el resto de su vida, cuando ella estuviese lejos e ignorase lo que les sucedía. Y esta idea apagó el placer que resultaba de contemplar los campos alumbrados por la luna. Cerró los ojos para sentir con mayor intensidad la presencia de un amor, de una simpatía más profundos y tiernos que los que emanaban de la tierra y del cielo. Aquél era con frecuencia el modo de rezar a solas de Dinah: sencillamente cerrando los ojos y sintiéndose rodeada por la divina presencia. Luego, gradualmente, sus miedos y sus ansiedades por los demás se fundían como cristales de hielo en un cálido océano. Permaneció inmóvil, con las manos cruzadas y alumbrada por la luna a lo largo de diez minutos, hasta que la sobresaltó el ruido de un objeto al chocar contra el suelo en la habitación de Hetty. Se levantó y prestó atención, y como todo permanecía en silencio, se tranquilizó en parte diciéndose que Hetty habría derribado alguna cosa en el momento de

acostarse. Despacio, empezó a desnudarse, pero aquel ruido la hizo concentrarse en Hetty, en aquella dulce niña a la que se le presentaba la vida con todas sus adversidades —los deberes diarios y solemnes de la esposa y de la madre—, y que por otro lado estaba tan mal preparada para afrontarlas; sólo pensaba en satisfacer sus placeres egoístas, como un niño que no piensa más que en sus juguetes al empezar un fatigoso viaje en el que habrá de pasar hambre, frío y soledad. Dinah se sentía más preocupada por Hetty desde que compartía el interés de Seth por los afectos de su hermano, y además no sabía que Hetty no amaba lo bastante a Adam para casarse con él. Había notado claramente la ausencia de un amor cálido y firme en la naturaleza de Hetty y por eso la frialdad de su conducta con respecto a Adam no le parecía una indicación evidente de que no fuese el hombre con quien quisiera casarse. Y esta frialdad en la naturaleza de Hetty, en vez de producirle disgusto, le infundía todavía mayor compasión; el hermoso rostro y la bella figura de la joven la impresionaban, como impresiona siempre la contemplación de la belleza a una mente tierna y libre de cualquier sentimiento celoso; y aquella belleza hacia resaltar aún más el pecado, el dolor y el sentimiento con que estaba confundida, del mismo modo que un blanco lirio enfermo da más pena que una planta vulgar en el mismo estado.

Cuando Dinah se había desnudado y puesto el camisón, notó que esos sentimientos que Hetty le inspiraba habían adquirido una intensidad penosa; su imaginación había creado un matorral espinoso de pecado y de dolor en el cual veía a la pobrecilla torturada y luchando, buscando con lágrimas en los ojos alguien que la salvara, sin encontrar a nadie. La imaginación y la simpatía de Dinah accionaban y reaccionaban habitualmente de este modo, de forma que cada una intensificaba a la otra. Sintió un intenso deseo de ir a ver a Hetty para pronunciar en su oído todas las palabras de tierno aviso y de súplica que llenaban su mente.

Pero quizás Hetty estaba ya dormida. Dinah aplicó el oído al tabique y oyó algunos ligeros ruidos que la convencieron de que la joven no se había acostado aún. Pero todavía dudaba, pues no estaba segura de haber recibido un mandato divino; la voz que la empujaba a acudir al lado de Hetty no parecía más fuerte que la otra que le recordaba la fatiga de la joven y le advertía de que una visita en un momento inoportuno sólo serviría para cerrar el corazón de la joven con mayor obstinación.

Dinah sufría por no tener un motivo más inequívoco que aquellas voces interiores. Había bastante luz en la habitación para abrir la Biblia y buscar un texto que le señalase la conducta que debía seguir. Conocía muy bien el aspecto general de cada página y era capaz de distinguir a primera vista el libro y hasta el capítulo por el que hubiese abierto el volumen. Su Biblia era un tomo pequeño, con los cantos redondeados. Dinah lo apoyó en el antepecho de la ventana, donde la luz era más viva, y abrió el volumen con el dedo índice. Las primeras palabras que vio se hallaban en lo alto de la página de la izquierda: «Y todos llorando con gran tristeza se abrazaron al cuello de Pablo y le besaron». Esto bastaba para Dinah; había abierto el libro por aquella memorable despedida de Éfeso, cuando Pablo se sintió inclinado a abrir su corazón en una exhortación y en un aviso postreros. No vaciló más y abriendo despacio la puerta de su dormitorio fue a llamar al de Hetty. Ya sabemos que tuvo que repetir la llamada, porque la joven, mientras tanto, apagó los cabos de vela y dejó caer su chal negro; pero después de llamar por segunda vez la puerta se abrió en el acto.

—¿Me permites que entre, Hetty? —preguntó Dinah.

La joven no respondió, pues estaba muy confusa, y abrió más la puerta para permitirle el paso.

¡Qué extraño contraste formaban aquellas dos figuras! A la luz de la luna se distinguían muy bien. Hetty tenía las mejillas sonrosadas y los ojos brillantes a causa de su drama imaginario, el hermoso cuello y los brazos desnudos, el cabello suelto y rizado cubriéndole la espalda, y las orejas adornadas por los vistosos pendientes. Dinah, en cambio, iba cubierta con su traje largo y blanco, y su pálido rostro mostraba una gran emoción, de modo que parecía un hermoso cadáver al que hubiese regresado el alma cargada de sublimes secretos y de un amor más sublime todavía. Tenían aproximadamente la misma estatura, aunque Dinah parecía algo más alta cuando rodeó con su brazo la cintura de Hetty y la besó en la frente.

—Ya sabía que no estabas acostada aún, querida mía —dijo con la voz dulce y clara que tanto irritaba a Hetty y que ahora la irritó más, pues en ese momento le molestaba su sola presencia—. Te oí moverte, y como deseaba hablarte esta noche, por ser la penúltima de mi estancia aquí, y temía que mañana no tuviésemos oportunidad para hacerlo… ¿Me permites que me siente mientras te arreglas el cabello?

—¡Oh, sí! —dijo Hetty volviéndose presurosa y cogiendo la segunda silla de la estancia, muy contenta al notar que Dinah no se había fijado en sus pendientes.

Esta última se sentó y Hetty empezó a peinarse el cabello para sujetarlo; sus movimientos fingían una indiferencia excesiva, propia de la confusión en que se hallaba. Pero pronto la tranquilizaron los ojos de Dinah que, al parecer, no se fijaban en los detalles.

—Querida Hetty —dijo—, hoy se me ha ocurrido que algún día puedes hallarte en un gran apuro, pues eso es lo corriente entre los mortales, y, a veces necesitamos más del consuelo y del auxilio del prójimo que de las cosas que podemos hallar en la vida. Quiero decirte que si alguna vez estás apurada y necesitas una amiga, que siempre te querrá, puedes contar con Dinah Morris, de Snowfield. Y si acudes a su lado o la haces llamar, ella nunca olvidará esta noche ni las palabras que ahora te dice. ¿Lo recordarás, Hetty?

—Sí —contestó ésta algo asustada—. Pero ¿por qué he de verme en algún apuro? ¿Sabes algo?

Hetty se sentó después de ponerse el gorro de dormir, y Dinah se inclinó hacia adelante y le tomó las manos antes de contestar.

—Te digo eso, querida mía, porque en nuestras vidas siempre aparece el dolor; permitimos que nuestros corazones se aficionen a cosas que Dios no nos ha destinado, y luego hemos de llorar su pérdida. Las personas a quienes amamos nos son arrebatadas, y entonces, al vernos sin ellas, no encontramos alegría en nada; llega la enfermedad y perdemos la fuerza bajo el peso de nuestros débiles cuerpos; nos extraviamos y cometemos algunas equivocaciones y, al mismo tiempo, nos ponemos en situaciones desagradables con nuestro prójimo. No existe hombre ni mujer en este mundo que no haya conocido la desgracia, y por esto estoy persuadida de que tú también tendrás que sufrir la parte que te está destinada. Por eso deseo que mientras eres joven pidas a tu Padre celestial la fuerza suficiente para soportar el dolor que no dejará de visitarte.

Dinah hizo una pausa y soltó las manos de Hetty. Esta permaneció inmóvil y no halló en su interior respuesta alguna para las palabras afectuosas de Dinah; pero las frases de ésta, pronunciadas de un modo solemne y patético, le infundieron gran temor. Desapareció el rubor de su rostro, que se quedó pálido; sintió entonces la timidez de la naturaleza que, inclinada al lujo y al placer, retrocede asustada al descubrir que en el mundo existe el dolor. Dinah advirtió los efectos de sus palabras y sus tiernas exhortaciones adquirieron mayor intensidad, hasta que Hetty, penetrada del vago temor de que algún día le ocurriría algo malo, se echó a llorar.

Tenemos la costumbre de decir que así como la naturaleza inferior jamás puede comprender a la elevada, ésta conoce muy bien a aquélla. Pero yo creo que la naturaleza superior ha de hacer un esfuerzo para adquirir esta comprensión, del mismo modo que aprendemos el arte de la visión a costa de duras experiencias, con frecuencia después de sufrir contusiones y equivocaciones, en nuestro empeño de coger las cosas por el extremo menos apropiado o figurándonos que el espacio que nos separa de ellas es más o menos amplio de lo que en realidad es. Dinah nunca había visto a Hetty afectada de esa forma, y con su habitual y benigna confianza, creyó que asistía al nacimiento de un impulso divino. Besó a la llorosa joven y la acompañó en su llanto, llena de alegría y de gratitud. Pero Hetty se hallaba sencillamente en aquel excitado estado mental en que no es posible adivinar la dirección que tomarán los sentimientos y, por primera vez, la irritaron las caricias de Dinah. La alejó de sí con cierta impaciencia y con llanto infantil exclamó:

—No me hables así, Dinah. ¿Para qué has venido a asustarme? Nunca te he hecho nada malo. ¿Por qué no me dejas en paz?

La pobre Dinah experimentó una sensación dolorosa. Era demasiado comprensiva para insistir, de modo que se limitó a contestarle con suavidad:

—Sí, querida mía. Estás fatigada y no te molestaré más. Apresúrate a acostarte. Buenas noches.

Salió de la estancia con la rapidez y el silencio de un fantasma; pero cuando estuvo junto a su propio lecho se dejó caer de rodillas y, en silencio, exteriorizó la compasión que llenaba su corazón.

En cuanto a Hetty, no tardó en hallarse de nuevo en el bosque, y los ensueños que, despierta, llenaban su mente, se confundieron con los que poco después, ya dormida, la asaltaron y que apenas eran más confusos o fragmentarios.

XVI

ESLABONES

Arthur Donnithorne, según ya se recordará, se había comprometido consigo mismo a visitar al señor Irwine el viernes por la mañana, y al despertar y vestirse temprano, decidió ir antes de desayunar y no después. Según le constaba, el rector desayunaba solo a las nueve y media, pues las señoras de la familia lo hacían a una hora distinta. Arthur podría, pues, dar un buen paseo a caballo cruzando la colina y desayunar luego con él. Después de comer es mucho más fácil hablar de lo que sea.

Los progresos de la civilización han convertido el desayuno o la cena en un sustituto agradable de otras ceremonias menos gratas. Nuestros propios errores tienen un aspecto menos grave si nuestro confesor nos escucha mientras toma un huevo o el café. Comprendemos muy bien que no hay que hablar entonces de las graves penitencias, porque no es incompatible, para los caballeros comprensivos, el pecado mortal con el deseo de pastelillos; el asalto contra nuestro bolsillo, que en tiempos más bárbaros se habría realizado en forma de pistoletazo, se ha transformado en la actualidad en la afable petición de un préstamo que se solicita entre la segunda y la tercera copa de vino clarete.

Sin embargo, en las antiguas formas rígidas había la ventaja de que le obligaban a uno a cumplir determinada resolución gracias a un hecho exterior. Cuando se pone la boca en la abertura de un agujero de la pared y se sabe que hay un oído atento en la parte opuesta, resulta menos inconveniente decir lo que uno quiere que estando sentado en posición cómoda, junto a una mesa de caoba y con un compañero que no tendrá ninguna razón para sorprenderse de que no tengamos nada que decirle.

Mientras Arthur Donnithorne recorría a caballo los agradables senderos a la luz del sol de la mañana, estaba decidido a abrir su corazón al rector, y el silbido de la guadaña, cuando pasaba junto a los prados, le parecía más agradable a causa de su honrado propósito. Le alegraba la promesa del buen tiempo, pues así se salvaría el heno y los campesinos no deberían temer por su cosecha; y como resulta muy grato compartir una alegría general y no contentarse con la personal, el recuerdo de la cosecha del heno reaccionó en su estado mental e hizo que su resolución le pareciera más fácil. El habitante de la ciudad creerá, tal vez, que un héroe de novela no ha de sentir esas influencias, pero cuando se vive en el campo resulta imposible sostener una superioridad sobre los placeres sencillos y naturales.

Arthur dejó atrás la aldea de Hayslope y se acercaba a la vertiente de la colina inmediata a Broxton cuando, en un recodo del camino, vio una figura que se hallaba a cien metros de distancia y en la que habría reconocido en el acto a Adam Bede aun cuando no viese a su lado el perro pastor de color gris. Adam andaba con su rapidez habitual y Arthur excitó a su caballo para alcanzarle, pues aún conservaba su juvenil amistad con Adam y no quería perder la ocasión de charlar un rato con él. No me atreveré a afirmar que aquel afecto no se debiese, en parte, a un sentimiento de protección, pues nuestro amigo Arthur gustaba de realizar actos generosos y de que se los reconociesen.

Adam volvió la cabeza al oír el ruido de los cascos del caballo y esperó al jinete, quitándose el gorro de papel y sonriendo al reconocerlo. Después de su hermano Seth, hubiese hecho más por Arthur Donnithorne que por cualquier hombre del mundo. Tuvo un gran disgusto cuando perdió la regla que llevaba siempre en el bolsillo y que le había regalado Arthur tras comprarla con su propio dinero a los once años de edad; y éste había aprendido mucho de las lecciones de carpintería de Adam, que colmaba a las mujeres de su casa con regalos de carretes para hilos y cajas redondas. En aquellos tiempos Adam se enorgullecía de su amistad con el joven caballero, y tales sentimientos apenas se habían modificado cuando el rubio muchacho llegó a la edad adulta. Hay que confesar que Adam era muy sensible a la influencia del rango y siempre estaba

dispuesto a demostrar su respeto por cualquiera que tuviera una posición superior a la suya, pues no era un filósofo ni un proletario imbuido de ideas democráticas, sino sencillamente un fornido e inteligente carpintero de carácter respetuoso que jamás disputaba los derechos de nadie, en caso de no ser dudosos. No tenía ninguna teoría encaminada a arreglar el mundo, pero, en cambio, advertía los perjuicios que resultaban de construir con mala madera y de que algunas personas tan bien vestidas como ignorantes planeasen cobertizos, talleres y cosas parecidas sin conocer los más elementales principios de la construcción, así como cuando se cumplían imprudentes contratos que, por fuerza, habían de acarrear la ruina de alguien. En todas estas situaciones, Adam estaba decidido a oponerse todo lo que pudiera. Y habría sido capaz de sostener su opinión con el mayor terrateniente de Loamshire o Stonyshire. Aparte de estas cuestiones comprendía que su deber era dejar hablar a los que sabían más que él. Veía con toda claridad lo mal que se explotaban los bosques de la propiedad y el estado vergonzoso de las granjas; y si el anciano caballero Donnithorne le hubiese preguntado por la causa de todo aquello, habría dado su opinión sin vacilar, aunque sin perder jamás el respeto debido a su noble interlocutor. La palabra «caballero» tenía gran importancia para Adam, aunque no por eso creía que, si era preguntado, no debía decir la verdad y abstenerse de la adulación innoble.

Con respecto al joven caballero, la reverencia instintiva de Adam comprendía también recuerdos infantiles y una consideración personal, de modo que tenía en mucho las buenas cualidades de Arthur y atribuía mayor mérito a las más pequeñas acciones bondadosas de éste que si hubiesen sido realizadas por un obrero vulgar, como él mismo, Creía firmemente que aquel en que el joven caballero tomase posesión de su herencia sería un buen día para todos los habitantes de Hayslope, pues Arthur poseía un carácter generoso y abierto, y, teniendo en cuenta su extremada juventud, era muy inteligente y sabía al dedillo las mejoras y reparaciones que convenía hacer. Por consiguiente, en la sonrisa que acompañó al acto de descubrir su cabeza cuando se acercaba Arthur Donnithorne, había tanto respeto como afecto.

—¿Cómo estás, Adam? —preguntó el jinete tendiéndole la mano. Como nunca la daba a ningún granjero, Adam comprendía muy bien el honor que se le hacía—. Te he reconocido desde muy lejos por tu espalda. Es la misma de antaño, aunque más fornida y ancha que cuando me llevabas a cuestas. ¿Te acuerdas?

—Sí, señor. Lo recuerdo. Mal iría si la gente no recordase lo que hizo y dijo durante su infancia. En tal caso no tendríamos más afecto por los viejos amigos que por los recientes.

—Supongo que vas a Broxton —observó Arthur poniendo su caballo al paso mientras Adam caminaba a su lado—. ¿Vas a la rectoría?

—No, señor. Voy al granero de Bradwell. Parece ser que el tejado ha inclinado las paredes, y voy a ver lo que puede hacerse antes de enviar los materiales y los obreros.

—De modo que Burge te lo confía todo, ¿verdad, Adam? No dudo de que pronto te asociará a su negocio. Así lo hará si es prudente.

—No, señor. No veo que eso le beneficiara en nada. Un encargado que sea hombre de conciencia y le guste el trabajo, le será tan útil como un socio. Por mi parte no daría un penique por el hombre que martillea despacio un clavo porque piensa que no se lo pagan a un precio extraordinario.

—Ya lo sé, Adam. Me consta que trabajas como si lo hicieses para ti mismo. Pero entonces tendrías más autoridad que ahora y quizás podrías dar un giro conveniente al negocio. Y puesto que el viejo ha de dejar de trabajar algún día y no tiene hijos varones, no dudo de que le gustaría confiárselo todo a su yerno. Sin embargo, creo que Burge es un poco interesado y le gustaría más un hombre que invirtiera algún dinero en su negocio. Si yo no fuese tan pobre como una rata, me gustaría emplear algún dinero de ese modo, para saber que te estableces en la propiedad, lo cual sé que acabaría siéndome útil. Sin embargo, tal vez dentro de uno o dos años esté en mejor situación. En cuanto cumpla la mayoría de edad tendré una renta más crecida, y en cuanto haya pagado una o dos deudas, podré ver lo que me conviene.

—Es muy bueno, señor. Y, por mi parte, se lo agradezco mucho. Sin embargo —continuó Adam en tono decidido—, no me gustaría hacer ninguna oferta al señor Burge o que alguien se la hiciese en mi nombre. No veo muy claro eso de la asociación. En cambio, si quisiera vender su negocio, el asunto cambiaría por completo. En tal caso no tendría inconveniente en tomar dinero prestado a un interés moderado, pues sin duda podría pagar los plazos que se convinieran.

—Muy bien, Adam —contestó Arthur recordando lo que le había dicho el señor Irwine acerca de cierto contratiempo surgido entre Adam y Mary Burge—. Por ahora no hablaremos más del asunto. ¿Cuándo entierran a su padre?

—El domingo, señor. El señor Irwine acudirá expresamente para la ceremonia. Y me alegraré mucho cuando todo quede listo, pues creo que mi madre estará más tranquila. Es muy penoso presenciar el dolor

de los viejos, pues no hallan consuelo en nada. Es como cuando la primavera no hace nacer brote alguno en un árbol seco.

—Muchos disgustos has tenido en la vida Adam. Y debo admitir que nunca te has mostrado aturdido o indiferente, como otros jóvenes. Siempre te han agobiado las preocupaciones.

—Sí, señor. Pero de nada sirve hablar de ello. Puesto que somos hombres y tenemos sentimientos como tales, hemos de sufrir como los hombres. No podemos ser como los pájaros que huyen del nido en cuanto saben volar, y no reconocen a sus padres cuando vuelven a verlos. Sin embargo, no puedo quejarme, porque siempre he tenido salud, fuerza e inteligencia para disfrutar de mi trabajo; y también considero una circunstancia muy dichosa el haber podido asistir a las clases nocturnas de Barde Massey. Él me ha ayudado mucho a adquirir unos conocimientos que jamás hubiese logrado por mí mismo.

—Eres un hombre raro, Adam —dijo Arthur después de una pausa en la que estuvo contemplando a su amigo—. Sé dar un puñetazo mejor que la mayor parte de los estudiantes de Oxford, pero estoy seguro de que me vencerías si tuviese que pelear contigo.

—No quiera Dios que eso suceda nunca, señor —contestó Adam mirando sonriente a Arthur—. Antes luchaba por diversión, pero no he vuelto a hacerlo desde el día en que por mi causa el pobre Gil Tranter tuvo que pasar quince días en cama. Jamás volveré a luchar con nadie, mientras no sea un canalla. Cuando se encuentra a un individuo que carece de conciencia y de vergüenza, bien está el tratar de darle una paliza.

Arthur no se rió preocupado con cierta idea que le hizo decir:

—Creo, Adam, que jamás has tenido que luchar contigo mismo. Estoy seguro de que tendrías la fuerza de voluntad necesaria para dominar un deseo incorrecto con la misma facilidad con que derribarías a un borracho inoportuno. Quiero decir, que nunca has cometido la tontería de hacer algo que de antemano te hubieses prohibido tú mismo.

—Es; verdad —contestó Adam lentamente, y después de larga vacilación—. Cuando tomo alguna decisión no me vuelvo nunca atrás, excepto, desde luego, cuando comprendo que no debía haberlo hecho. Cuando creo que me arrepentiría de algo, no lo hago por mucho que pueda desearlo. Desde que supe sumar comprendí que debía abstenerme de hacer cosas incorrectas, pues siempre son causa de preocupaciones o disgustos. Es como cuando se hace mal un trabajo. Nunca pueden adivinarse los perjuicios que llegarán a causar. Sería muy triste venir al mundo para hacer peores y no mejores a nuestros semejantes. Sin embargo, existe una diferencia entre las cosas que la gente considera incorrectas. Yo no creo que sea pecado una tontería que alguien pueda cometer. De todos modos, mi defecto no es ser irresoluto, sino todo lo contrario, porque cuando decido algo, aunque sea conmigo mismo, me resulta muy duro y difícil volverme atrás.

—Eso es precisamente lo que me figuraba —dijo Arthur—. Tienes una voluntad de hierro y también un brazo férreo. Sin embargo, por vigorosa que sea la decisión de un hombre, a veces le cuesta mucho cumplir su propósito. Por ejemplo, podemos resolvernos a no coger cerezas y, para evitar la tentación, meternos las manos en el bolsillo; pero ello no impedirá que se nos haga la boca agua.

—Es verdad, señor; pero de nada sirve tomar decisiones a veces, porque en el mundo nos vemos obligados a hacer muchas cosas. La vida es algo muy distinto de la feria de Treddleston, a la que asiste la gente con el único objeto de ver los puestos y hacer compras. Pero ¿para qué le hablo de eso, señor? Usted lo sabe mejor que yo.

—No estoy muy seguro, Adam. Tú tienes cuatro o cinco años de experiencia más que yo y, por otra parte, la vida ha sido para ti una escuela mejor que para mi el colegio.

—Veo, señor, que opina de él como Barde Massey. Dice que el colegio convierte a la gente en vejigas, que no sirven para nada más que para guardar lo que se meta en ellas. Sin embargo, Barde tiene una lengua que corta y no hay que hacerle mucho caso. Y ya hemos llegado a la curva del camino, señor. Si va a la rectoría, debo despedirme de usted.

—Adiós, Adam, adiós.

Arthur entregó su caballo al mozo que halló en la puerta de la rectoría, y anduvo a pie por la grava en dirección a la puerta que daba al jardín. Sabía que el rector desayunaba siempre en su estudio y que éste se hallaba a la izquierda de aquella puerta, frente al comedor.

Era una pequeña habitación de techo bajo, que pertenecía a la parte antigua de la casa, y a la que oscurecían las sombrías cubiertas de los libros que llenaban los estantes; sin embargo, aquella mañana tenía un aspecto muy risueño cuando Arthur llegó ante la ventana abierta. El sol dirigía sus oblicuos rayos a la enorme pecera de cristal que contenía algunos peces dorados, situada en una columna de escayola, frente a la mesa en que desayunaba aquel solterón; junto a dicha mesa se veía un grupo que habría hecho agradable cualquier habitación. El señor Irwine se sentaba en un sillón de damasco carmesí, y en su rostro había la radiante lozanía habitual después de su lavatorio matutino. Su mano regordeta, blanca y bien formada,

jugueteaba en el lomo pardo de Juno, y junto al rabo de la perra, que ella meneaba con el placer apacible de una matrona, se revolcaban los dos cachorros entonando un dúo de desagradables aullidos. Sobre un almohadón algo alejado estaba tendida Pug, con el aspecto de una dama solterona que considera debilidades aquellas muestras de familiaridad, y de este modo se abstenía todo lo posible de observarlas. Sobre la mesa y junto al codo del señor Irwine, se veía el primer tomo de las obras completas de Esquilo de Foulis, que Arthur reconocía sólo con verlo. Y la cafetera de plata que Carroll llevaba despedía un aroma que completaba las delicias del desayuno de un solterón.

—¡Hola, Arthur!, ¡buen muchacho! Llega a tiempo —exclamó el señor Irwine mientras el joven entraba en la estancia saltando por la baja ventana—. Carroll, necesitaremos más café y huevos, y además, mira a ver si encuentras fiambre de pollo para comérnosla con este jamón. ¡Caramba! Parece que estemos en otra época, Arthur, porque por lo menos han trascurrido cinco años desde la última vez que vino a desayunar conmigo.

—Hace una mañana muy agradable y me tentó para dar un paseo antes de desayunar —dijo Arthur—. Y recordé también que tenía la costumbre de hacerlo con usted cuando estudiábamos juntos. Mi abuelo está más frío en el desayuno que en las restantes horas del día. Yo he llegado a sospechar que el baño le pone de malhumor.

Arthur deseaba dar a entender que no le llevaba allí ningún propósito concreto. Apenas se vio en presencia del señor Irwine cuando desapareció la confianza que poco antes tuviera en sí mismo, y el objeto de su visita le pareció muy distinto. ¿Cómo podría explicar a Irwine su situación, sin hablarle de las pequeñas escenas del bosque, y cómo le haría el relato de lo ocurrido sin parecer tonto? Además recordó la debilidad de que dio muestras al regresar de casa de Gawaine al hacer precisamente lo contrario de lo que se había propuesto. Irwine le consideraría un majadero. Y se propuso hablar del asunto de un modo impremeditado y dejar que la conversación lo llevara a él.

—Yo disfruto más a la hora del desayuno que en cualquier otro momento del día —dijo el señor Irwine —. A esta hora todavía tengo la mente limpia de polvo y así es un espejo mejor para reflejar los rayos de las cosas. Además, procuro leer un libro agradable, y es tanto lo que me gusta leer en estos momentos que hasta incluso llego a formarme la ilusión de volver a ser un estudioso. Pero luego Dent me trae a un pobre desgraciado que ha matado una liebre, y en cuanto he hecho justicia, según dice Carroll, me siento inclinado a dar un paseo a caballo. En mi camino encuentro al director del asilo, que me refiere una larga historia de un motín de los indigentes; y así, a medida que avanza el día, vuelvo a ser el mismo individuo perezoso de siempre. Uno necesita el estímulo de la simpatía y no he gozado de él desde que el pobre
D'Oyley
salió de Treddleston. Si se hubiera aplicado más a los libros, bribón, yo podría ahora abrigar mejores esperanzas. Pero en su familia no hay mucha afición al estudio.

—Es verdad. Bastante haré con recordar algunas frases latinas para adornar mi primer discurso en el Parlamento, dentro de cinco o seis años. *Cras ingeris iterabimus aequor*, y otras cosas por el estilo de las cuales tal vez me acuerde y haré lo posible para emplearlas. Pero no creo que un caballero rural tenga gran necesidad de conocer a los clásicos; es preferible que conozca las buenas maneras. Recientemente he leído los libros de vuestro amigo Arthur Young, y no hay nada que pueda gustarme más que el poner en práctica algunas de sus ideas para explotar mejor la tierra, y, como él dice, transformar una tierra inculta, toda del mismo tono oscuro, en otra brillante y de colores variados y que abunde en trigo y en ganado. Mi abuelo jamás me dejará gozar del menor poder mientras viva, pero me gustaría mucho cuidar de las propiedades del lado de Stonyshire, que se hallan en muy mala situación, y encargarme de hacer mejoras en todas partes, para lo que recorrería las tierras paso a paso. Me gustaría conocer a todos los labradores y que ellos, por su parte, me saludasen al verme con gusto.

—¡Bravo, Arthur! Un hombre que no tiene afición a los clásicos no podría hacer una apología mejor de ellos al entrar en el mundo que la que supone aumentar la cantidad de víveres para mantener a los estudiantes y a los rectores que los aprecian. Pero cuando usted inaugure su carrera de propietario modelo, deseo estar a su lado para presenciarlo. Para completar el cuadro necesitará un rector majestuoso, que perciba el diezmo de todo el respeto y de todo el honor que conquiste gracias a su duro trabajo. De todos modos, no se haga ilusiones acerca del agradecimiento que obtendrá, pues no tengo ninguna seguridad de que los hombres aprecien a quienes tratan de serles útiles. Ya sabe que Gawaine ha conquistado la maldición de todos los vecinos a causa de aquella valla. Es preciso que, de antemano, se decida sobre si lo que quiere es conquistar la popularidad o si prefiere ser útil, pues si no toma una decisión previa, es posible que no alcance ninguno de los dos objetivos.

—¡Oh! Gawaine es hombre de maneras poco simpáticas y que no se ha hecho agradable a sus

arrendatarios. Estoy persuadido de que se puede obtener todo de la gente tratándola con bondad. Por mi parte, no podría vivir en una vecindad en la que no fuese respetado y amado, pues me resulta muy agradable ir a visitar a los arrendatarios que, aparentemente, me quieren. Supongo que debe de parecerles ayer cuando yo era un muchachito que montaba un poney tan grande como una oveja. Y si se les concedieran ventajas y se hiciesen reparaciones en sus casas y cobertizos, creo que, aunque son tontos, se les podría convencer de que explotaran la tierra de un modo más conveniente.

—Pues entonces tenga cuidado de enamorarse de la mujer conveniente y no se case con una que le exprima la bolsa y le obligue a cometer tonterías. Algunas veces mi madre y yo discutimos sobre usted, y en tales ocasiones yo siempre digo: «No puedo arriesgarme a profetizar lo que hará Arthur hasta conocer a la mujer de quien se enamore». Mi madre cree que su futura esposa le dominará, como la luna gobierna las mareas. Yo le defiendo, sin embargo, en mi calidad de maestro, y sostengo que no es tan blando. Por consiguiente, procure no defraudar mi opinión.

Arthur se disgustó al oír estas palabras, porque la aguda opinión del señor Irwine sobre él le producía el efecto desagradable de una profecía siniestra. Aquello constituía otra razón para perseverar en sus intenciones y lograr una seguridad adicional contra sí mismo. No obstante, y en vista del curso de la conversación, se sintió menos inclinado a referir su historia con Hetty. El joven tenía una naturaleza impresionable y hacía mucho caso de las opiniones de los demás con respecto a sí mismo. Y el mero hecho de hallarse en presencia de un amigo íntimo que no sospechaba la lucha interna que había ido a confiarle, le inducía a no hablar de aquello, aparte de que Irwine no podría hacer nada que él mismo no fuera capaz de realizar. A pesar de la cojera de Meg, se marcharía a Eagledale y hasta montaría a Rattler, dejando que Pym le siguiese como pudiera con algún caballo viejo. Esta fue la idea que tuvo en el momento de echar azúcar en el café; pero luego, al llevarse la taza a los labios, recordó cuán decidido había estado la noche anterior a referírselo todo a Irwine. No, no vacilaría más, y haría lo que se había propuesto. Por tanto, convenía impedir que la conversación tratase de asuntos menos personales, pues si empezaban a hablar de cosas indiferentes sus dificultades resultarían mayores. Estas ideas cruzaron con rapidez por su mente, de modo que apenas hubo una pausa, replicó:

—Por mi parte, creo que es un pobre argumento contra la fuerza de voluntad de un hombre el hecho de que sea más o menos apto para dejarse conquistar por el amor. Una salud excelente no da ninguna garantía contra la viruela o cualquier enfermedad inevitable. Y también es posible que un hombre demuestre gran firmeza de carácter en otros asuntos y, sin embargo, sea embrujado por una mujer.

—Es verdad —contestó Irwine—. Pero hay cierta diferencia entre el amor y la viruela o el embrujamiento. Por ejemplo, si observa síntomas de una enfermedad en su primera fase y se apresura a cambiar de aires, es muy probable que la evite. Existen, además, otros medios al alcance de un hombre para imaginarse las consecuencias desagradables de lo que hace; eso equivale a un cristal ahumado por el que podemos mirar a una mujer hermosa a fin de discernir su verdadera figura, aunque temo que en el momento conveniente no se disponga de ese cristal ahumado. E incluso me atrevo a afirmar que hasta los hombres fortificados por el conocimiento de los clásicos pueden contraer un matrimonio imprudente, a pesar de los avisos que da el coro en el *Prometeo*.

En el rostro de Arthur se dibujó una débil sonrisa pero, en lugar de seguir hablando en broma como el señor Irwine, replicó con gran seriedad:

—Sí. Eso es lo peor. Resulta muy desagradable que después de las reflexiones y de las decisiones que se hayan tomado vengan a gobernarnos de un modo que no podamos prever. No creo que deba censurarse a un hombre a pesar de que realice determinadas acciones contrarias a su resolución.

—Pero es preciso tener en cuenta, hijo mío, que lo mismo que sus reflexiones, y aún más, se hallan en su naturaleza los impulsos de sus actos. Nadie puede hacer algo contrario a su propia naturaleza. El hombre lleva en sí el germen de sus actos, aun los más excepcionales; y si nosotros, personas prudentes, cometemos alguna tontería en una ocasión dada, hemos de aceptar que en cada kilo de sabiduría que poseemos están mezclados algunos gramos de tontería.

—Sí, pero podemos vernos obligados por las circunstancias a hacer determinadas cosas que uno por sí mismo no habría hecho.

—También es verdad que nadie puede robar un billete de banco si no lo tiene al alcance de la mano, aunque no nos hará creer que es un hombre honrado el hecho de que se ponga a soplar para que el billete caiga en su camino.

—De todos modos, no creo que consideréis tan mal a quien lucha contra una tentación, aunque sea para caer finalmente en ella, como al que ni siquiera trata de resistir.

—No, hijo mío. Le compadezco en proporción con su lucha, porque ésta demuestra su sufrimiento

interior, que es la peor forma de Némesis. Las consecuencias son despiadadas. Nuestros actos acarrean sus terribles consecuencias, aparte de las fluctuaciones que antes pudieron tener, y esas consecuencias pocas veces ejercen su efecto sólo en nosotros. Y es mejor fijar nuestras mentes en esta certeza, en vez de examinar cuáles pueden ser las excusas de nuestros actos. De todos modos, nunca le creí tan aficionado a las discusiones morales, Arthur. ¿Corre acaso algún peligro que esté examinando ahora de un modo general y filosófico?

Al hacer esta pregunta, el señor Irwine alejó de sí el plato que tenía delante, se reclinó en el respaldo de su sillón y se quedó mirando a Arthur. Sospechaba que éste quería decirle algo, y quiso allanarle el camino con esta pregunta. Pero se equivocó. Al verse repentinamente en el borde de su confesión, Arthur retrocedió y se sintió menos dispuesto que nunca a referir su historia. La conversación había adquirido un tono de seriedad mayor que el que se había propuesto, y ello hizo creer a Irwine que sentía una profunda pasión por Hetty, cuando eso no era cierto. Arthur se sonrojó y se irritó consigo mismo por esta causa.

—¡Oh, no! Nada de peligro —dijo con cuanta indiferencia pudo—. Ignoro si soy más irresoluto que otras personas; únicamente que a veces ocurren pequeños incidentes que le obligan a uno, a pensar en lo que pueda ocurrir en el futuro.

¿Existía algún motivo causante de esta reserva de Arthur, aunque él mismo no lo admitiese? Nuestros asuntos mentales se gobiernan del mismo modo que los del Estado. Una gran parte del trabajo lo realizan algunos agentes desconocidos. También en una máquina suele haber una ruedecita que apenas se ve y de la que depende el movimiento de otras piezas mayores. Era posible que en aquel momento hubiese algún agente desconocido que gobernara la mente de Arthur y quizás todo se debiese al temor de confesarse con el rector y luego no tener la fuerza de voluntad de atenerse a sus propias decisiones. No me atrevo a afirmar que no fuese así, porque el alma humana es muy complicada.

Mientras el rector contemplaba a Arthur, cruzó por su mente la idea de Hetty, pero la respuesta indiferente del joven le dio a entender que no podía existir nada serio sobre el particular. No había ninguna probabilidad de que Arthur viese a la joven más que en la iglesia o en su propia casa, bajo la vigilancia de la señora Poyser; y la indicación que el otro día le había dado a Arthur acerca de la muchacha, no tenía más importancia que la de impedir que éste suscitase la vanidad de aquella niña, perturbando así el rústico drama de su vida. Arthur no tardaría en reunirse con su regimiento y en alejarse de allí. No. Por aquel lado no había ningún peligro, aunque el carácter de Arthur no lo garantizara. Su orgullo y honradez al tratar de proteger a todos los que le rodeaban para lograr el respeto general, era una salvaguardia incluso contra el más tonto romance y mucho más aún contra una insensatez. Y era evidente que si Arthur había tratado de referirse a algo no había querido entrar en detalles, y el señor Irwine era demasiado delicado para manifestar siquiera una curiosidad amistosa.

El rector comprendió que se imponía cambiar de conversación y dijo:

—Ahora que recuerdo, Arthur: en el cumpleaños de su coronel se hicieron algunas manifestaciones de gran efecto en honor de Inglaterra, de Pitt y de la milicia de Loamshire, y, sobre todo, del «generoso joven» que fue el héroe del día. Creo que debería procurar algo semejante para asombrar nuestras débiles mentes.

Había desaparecido la oportunidad. Mientras Arthur vacilaba, se desvaneció la cuerda a la que podía haberse agarrado y, por consiguiente, se vio obligado a salvarse librado a sus propias fuerzas.

Diez minutos más tarde llamaron al señor Irwine para que se ocupara de sus asuntos, y Arthur, después de despedirse, montó a caballo muy poco satisfecho de sí mismo, aunque se consoló diciéndose que partiría en dirección de Eagledale inmediatamente.

LIBRO SEGUNDO

XVII

En el que la historia se detiene un poco

«El rector de Broxton no es más que un pagano —oigo exclamar a alguna de mis lectoras—. Habría resultado más edificante hacerle dar a Arthur algún buen consejo espiritual. Habría usted podido poner en sus labios algunas bellas expresiones, que equivaldrían a la lectura de un sermón».

Claro que sí que habría podido hacerlo, mi bella lectora, si yo fuese un novelista hábil y no me viese obligado a ceñirme servilmente a la naturaleza y a los hechos, si fuese capaz de representar las cosas tal como no han sido ni serán jamás. Entonces mis personajes serían enteramente de mi propia cosecha y hubiera podido escoger el tipo más habitual de ministro, poniendo siempre en sus labios mis admirables opiniones personales. Pero ya hace rato que debe usted de haberse dado cuenta de que no tengo vocación tan elevada, y de que sólo aspiro a representar fielmente a los hombres y a las cosas que se reflejan en mi espíritu. El espejo es doblemente defectuoso; los contornos a veces saldrán borrosos, la imagen, débil o confusa. Pero me esfuerzo en mostrarle, tan exactamente como puedo, cuál es este reflejo, como si me encontrara en el banquillo de los testigos haciendo mi declaración jurada.

Hace sesenta años —ya ha llovido algo desde entonces, y no es extraño que las cosas hayan cambiado—, los ministros no eran todos hombres de mucho celo. En realidad, podemos creer que los que demostraban tener celo en su misión eran muy pocos, y es probable que si un miembro de esa pequeña minoría hubiese sido titular de los curatos de Broxton y de Hayslope el año 1799, no lo habríamos amado más que a monseñor Irwine. Podría apostar diez contra uno que le habría usted encontrado falto de gusto y, además, indiscreto. ¡Es tan raro encontrar aquel justo medio que reclaman nuestras opiniones más lúcidas y nuestro gusto más refinado! Y quizá me diga usted: «Entonces, retoque un poco los hechos, para que concuerden mejor con esas figuras correctas que tenemos el privilegio de poseer. El mundo no es propiamente como lo quisiéramos. Dele, pues, unos retoques de buen gusto, y haga que no resulte una cosa tan confusa y embrollada. Que cuantos tengan opiniones irreprochables obren en consecuencia. Que sus personajes viciosos sean siempre culpables, y que los honrados obren siempre virtuosamente. De este modo y a simple vista podremos apreciar las gentes y las cosas que debemos condenar, lo que también nos permitirá admirar sin tener que modificar nuestras ideas preconcebidas. Podremos odiar y despreciar, con aquel placer delicioso característico de una confianza justificada».

Pero, querida amiga, ¿qué haría usted de ese feligrés que contradice a su marido en la sacristía? ¿De ese nuevo vicario cuyo modo de predicar le desagrada y al que considera muy por debajo de su predecesor? ¿De ese honrado criado que la atormenta con sus faltas? ¿De su vecina, la señorita Green, que se portó magníficamente con usted durante su última enfermedad, pero que comentó algunas cosas malas de usted en su convalecencia? ¿Y hasta de su propio marido, que tiene algunas costumbres irritantes, además de que no se limpia los zapatos al entrar? Todos esos mortales, nuestros semejantes, deben ser aceptados tal como son. Son esas gentes, entre las que transcurre su vida, las que usted debe saber tolerar, compadecer y amar. Son esas personas, más o menos feas, sin talento, insociables, aquellas en las que debe usted ser capaz de admirar los buenos impulsos y en favor de las cuales debe esperar siempre caritativamente. No quisiera, aunque pudiese, ser el hábil novelista creador de un mundo superior a éste en que nos levantamos por la mañana para entregarnos a nuestros trabajos diarios, y del que, tal vez, acabara usted contemplando con ojos duros y fríos los caminos polvorientos y los campos de verde normal, del mismo modo que a esos hombres y a esas mujeres realmente existentes, que pueden quedarse helados con su indiferencia o sufrir con sus prejuicios, que pueden ser regocijados o animados por su simpatía, su apoyo, sus buenos consejos y

recta justicia.

Me contento, pues, narrando esta simple historia, sin intentar hacer aparecer las cosas mejores de lo que son, y sin temor a nada más que a la falsedad, la cual, a pesar de nuestros mejores esfuerzos, debe ser temida siempre. El error es muy fácil, y la verdad, muy difícil. El lápiz se presta con agradable facilidad a dibujar un grifo; cuanto más largas sean las garras y más anchas las alas, nos parecerá mucho mejor. Pero esa maravillosa facilidad, que nos parecía genial, es probable que nos abandone cuando nos propongamos dibujar sin exageración un león verdadero. Examinad bien vuestras palabras y encontraréis que, hasta cuando no tenéis ningún motivo para ser falsos, es muy difícil decir la verdad exacta, hasta con respecto a vuestros sentimientos actuales. Mucho más difícil que decir algo bello que no sea rigurosamente verdadero.

Es por esa rara y preciosa cualidad de la verdad que me complazco tanto contemplando esas pinturas holandesas que desprecian las gentes de espíritu superior. Encuentro una fuente de deliciosa simpatía en las representaciones fieles de una monótona existencia íntima, como lo es la de la mayor parte de nuestros semejantes, mucho más que en una vida de grandeza o de indigencia absoluta, de sufrimientos trágicos o de actos brillantes. Paso, sin vacilar, de la aureola de los ángeles, de los profetas, de las sibilas, de los héroes militares, a una mujer anciana inclinada sobre su tiesto de flores, o bien haciendo su comida solitaria, mientras la luz del día, tamizada quizá por una cortina de follajes, cae sobre su cofia y va a morir al borde de su torno de hilar o de su cántaro de tierra, o de tantos objetos de poco precio que constituyen para ella las más preciosas necesidades de su vida. También me atrae esa boda de aldea, encerrada entre cuatro paredes ennegrecidas, en la que un gordinflón, que es el novio, abre el baile con una novia de hombros subidos y de ancho rostro, mientras unos amigos viejos o de edad madura, de facciones poco regulares, los contemplan con una expresión de contento y de benevolencia. «¡Bah! —exclamará algún idealista—. ¡Qué detalles tan vulgares! ¿Por qué tanto trabajo para reproducir la semejanza exacta de las mujeres viejas y de los novios gordinflones? ¡Qué peldaño tan bajo de la existencia! ¡Qué gente tan fea y grosera!».

Pero, gracias a Dios, existen cosas que pueden amarse, aunque no sean precisamente bellas, a mi parecer. No tengo la absoluta seguridad de que la mayor parte de la raza humana no sea fea. Hasta entre los más puros tipos de los habitantes de Gran Bretaña, las figuras rechonchas, las narices mal dibujadas y las pieles morenas no constituyen excepciones raras. Sin embargo, hay mucha ternura y mucho afecto en nuestras familias. Tengo uno o dos amigos cuyas facciones son tales que el bucle de Apolo en lo alto de su frente sería algo ridículo. Sin embargo, me consta que hubo corazones tiernos que palpitaron por ellos, y sus retratos, poco bonitos, aunque bastante favorecidos, han sido besados en secreto por labios maternales. He visto más de una excelente matrona que en sus años jóvenes no pudo nunca ser bella, conservar en un cajón secreto un viejo paquete de cartas de amor, sin que por ello sus dulces hijos dejaran de cubrirle de besos las pálidas mejillas. Creo que ha existido un buen número de jóvenes héroes, de talla mediana y barba rala, que creyeron imposible amar nunca a nadie que no fuese una Diana y que, sin embargo, en la mitad del camino de su vida, se encontraron unidos a una mujer menos que vulgar. Sí, gracias a Dios, el amor humano es como los ríos poderosos que fecundan la tierra. No espera que llegue la belleza, sino que se lanza con fuerza irresistible y la trae consigo.

¡Honor y respeto a la perfección divina de la forma! Busquémosla tanto como sea posible en los hombres, las mujeres y los niños, en nuestros jardines y en nuestras moradas. Pero sepamos también amar esa otra belleza que no reside en los secretos de la proporción, sino en los de una profunda simpatía humana. Pintad, si queréis, un ángel con ropas violetas, y con el rostro fulgurante de luz celeste; pintad una madona de dulce figura, con el rostro levantado hacia el cielo, extendiendo los brazos para recibir la gloria divina, pero no nos impongáis ninguna regla estética que deba expulsar de las regiones del arte esas viejas mujeres que preparan las zanahorias con sus manos descarnadas, ni esos pesados bailarines que se divierten en una taberna llena de humo; esas espaldas redondeadas, esos rostros sencillos y tostados por el sol que se encorvaron de tanto hundir el azadón y que soportaron el rudo trabajo de este mundo; esos interiores con sus platos de cobre, sus cántaros pardos, sus perros de pelo grosero y sus cadenas de cebollas. ¡Se encuentran tantas gentes como ésas, vulgares y groseras, cuya vida no ofrece ningún infortunio sentimentalmente pintoresco! Es necesario que nos acordemos de su existencia, pues, en caso contrario, podríamos acabar dejándolas al margen de nuestra religión y de nuestra filosofía, y establecer teorías tan elevadas que sólo se adaptarían a un mundo excepcional. Que la pintura, en consecuencia, nos lo recuerde siempre; tengamos constantemente hombres dispuestos a dar con amor el trabajo de su vida a la representación fiel de las cosas sencillas; hombres que sepan ver la belleza de los objetos ordinarios y que hallen su felicidad en demostrar que la luz de los cielos se complace en iluminarlos. Hay pocos profetas en el mundo, pocas mujeres de una belleza sublime, pocos héroes. Yo no puedo resignarme a otorgar todo mi amor y todo mi respeto a esos seres raros. Necesito una parte de esos sentimientos para concederlos a mis

semejantes de cada día, sobre todo al pequeño número de aquellos que forman para mí el primer plano de esa gran muchedumbre, aquellos cuyo rostro conozco, cuya mano estrecho y a los cuales debo ceder el paso con benévola cortesía. Los pintorescos mendigos o los criminales dramáticos no se encuentran tan frecuentemente como nuestro labrador ordinario que gana honradamente su pan y se lo come prosaicamente, cortándolo con su cuchillo de bolsillo. Es más probable y necesario que una fibra simpática me una a ese ciudadano vulgar que me pesa el azúcar, y que lleva una corbata que no hace juego con su chaleco; mucho más necesario y probable que a ese soberbio malvado que lleva manto rojo y plumas verdes. Prefiero que mi corazón se hinche de tierna admiración por algún rasgo de amable bondad de las gentes mediocres que se sientan en mi hogar, o del modesto ministro de mi parroquia, aunque no sea un Oberlin o un Tillotson, que por los altos hechos de unos héroes que no conozco personalmente, o por el más admirable conjunto de gracias clericales que jamás haya concebido un hábil novelista.

Y vuelvo a monseñor Irwine, para el que os ruego una caridad perfecta, por muy lejos que se halle de responder de un modo exacto a lo que esperáis de un carácter eclesiástico. Quizá creéis que no era, como debiera serlo, una viva demostración de los beneficios que el alma humana espera de un ministro de su iglesia. Pero no estoy seguro de esto. Sólo sé que las gentes de Broxton y de Hayslope hubiesen sufrido mucho si llegan a obligarles a separarse de su pastor, y que la mayoría de rostros se iluminaban cuando él se les acercaba. Hasta que pueda probarse que el odio es más saludable que el amor, creeré que la influencia del señor Irwine, en su parroquia, era más útil que la del celoso señor Ryde, que, veinte años más tarde, sucedió al señor Irwine, cuando éste pasó a mejor vida. Es verdad que el señor Ryde insistía fuertemente sobre las doctrinas de la religión, hacía muchas visitas a sus feligreses, condenaba severamente los deseos de la carne, y hasta hizo cesar de una vez las rondas de Navidad de los cantores de la iglesia, porque fomentaban la embriaguez y trataban con demasiada ligereza las cosas santas. Pero yo recogí, de la boca de Adam Bede, con quien yo hablé de eso en su ancianidad, que pocos ministros fracasaron tanto en ganar los corazones de sus feligreses como monseñor Ryde. Insistía mucho sobre las opiniones y los puntos de doctrina, de modo que casi todos los cincuenta asistentes a los oficios aprendieron a distinguir el Evangelio puro de lo que no parecía precisamente formar parte de él, tan bien como si hubiesen nacido y hubiesen sido criados en el propio templo. Después de su llegada, durante algún tiempo, pareció que realmente existía un movimiento religioso en aquel tranquilo distrito rural.

—Pero —añadía Adam— empecé a ver claramente, cuando dejé de ser un muchacho, que la religión es algo más que una serie de opiniones. No son las opiniones las que impulsan a la gente joven a realizar buenas acciones, sino los sentimientos. Ocurre con las opiniones, en religión, como con las matemáticas: un hombre puede ser muy capaz de resolver de memoria los problemas mientras fuma su pipa cerca del hogar, pero si se trata de construir una máquina o un edificio, es preciso que tenga voluntad, decisión, y que ame algo más que sus comodidades. De una manera o de otra, sea cual fuere la causa de ello, lo cierto es que las gentes comenzaron a hablar con ligereza del señor Ryde, y la congregación empezó a declinar. Creo que, en el fondo, sus intenciones eran buenas; pero hay que decir que tenía el carácter difícil, que quería disminuir el salario de los que trabajaban para él, y que esto no podía favorecer a su predicación. Quería hacer de juez en su parroquia y castigar a las gentes que se portaban mal; las aludía desde lo alto de su púlpito como hubiese podido hacerlo un predicador iluminado; y hay que confesar que, a los tibios o disidentes, les hacía mayor guerra que el señor Irwine. Y, además, que no sabía contentarse con sus ingresos, pues al principio pareció creer que seiscientas libras esterlinas al año debían convertirle en un hombre tan importante como el señor Donnithorne. Noté muchas veces esta tontería en ministros pobres que de pronto alcanzaban un curato de alguna importancia. El señor Ryde gozaba de reputación, que al parecer llegaba lejos, y hasta escribía libros, pero era tan ignorante como una mujer en cuestiones de matemáticas y de la naturaleza de las cosas. No puede negarse que era muy sabio en dogmas, pero entendía poco de negocios. En cambio, el señor Irwine era el polo opuesto; comprendía al instante lo que querían decirle; conocía todo lo relativo a la construcción, y sabía comprender cuándo se trabajaba bien. Se portaba como un hidalgo con los granjeros, las mujeres ancianas y los labradores, igual que con los burgueses. No se le veía jamás imponerse, refunfuñar, reñir o hacer el déspota. ¡Ah! Era el hombre más guapo que se haya conocido, y muy bueno para su madre y hermanas. Aquella pobre enferma, la señorita Ana, tuvo mucha suerte con él. Se preocupaba de ella más que de todas las cosas del mundo. Nadie absolutamente, en la parroquia, tenía nada que decir contra él, y sus criados permanecían en su casa hasta que se hacían viejos y ya eran impotentes para trabajar, cosa que le obligaba a buscar otros.

—¡Muy bien! —dije yo—. Era una excelente manera de predicar para los días de entre semana; pero quizá si su viejo amigo, el señor Irwine, pudiese volver a la vida y subir al púlpito el domingo próximo, le daría a usted vergüenza si no lo oyera predicar mejor, después de todos sus elogios.

—No, no —dijo Adam, irguiéndose y repantigándose en su silla como si estuviera dispuesto a aceptar todas las consecuencias de cuanto había dicho—; nadie me ha oído decir nunca que monseñor Irwine fuese un predicador famoso. No penetraba mucho en la experiencia moral. Sé muy bien que hay muchas cosas en la vida interior que no pueden medirse con cartabón; que no se puede decir: «Haced esto, y obtendréis aquello»; o bien: «Haced esto, y saldrá lo de más allá». No. Tantas cosas ocurren dentro del alma que, en ciertos momentos, los sentimientos penetran en ella como un viento impetuoso, como dice la Escritura, y parecen dividir la vida en dos, de modo que te contemplas como si fueras otro. Esta clase de cosas no puede encerrarse en un «haz esto y haz aquello», y esto lo mantendré contra quien sea. Eso me demuestra que, en religión, hay cosas profundas, cosas abstractas. No podemos expresarlas exactamente con palabras, pero podemos sentirlas. Monseñor Irwine no abordaba esa clase de temas; hacía cortos sermones de moral, y eso era todo. Pero se comportaba muy en consonancia con lo que decía. No se presentaba hoy como un hombre diferente de los demás y mañana parecido a ellos como un guisante a otro guisante. Se hacía amar y respetar, cosa que valía más que calentar la bilis de la gente con palabras demasiado incisivas. La señora Poyser acostumbraba a decir, y ya sabe usted que tenía una palabra para cada cosa: «Monseñor Irwine era como un plato de buen guisado, que te gusta sin que te des cuenta, y monseñor Ryde es como una dosis de medicina que te amarga y atormenta para dejarte igual que antes».

—Pero ¿monseñor Ryde no predicaba mucho más sobre esa parte espiritual de la religión de que habla usted, Adam? ¿No sacaba más provecho de sus sermones que de los de monseñor Irwine?

—¡Ah! No sé. Predicaba mucho sobre los dogmas. Pero, como ya le dije, más tarde comprendí claramente que la religión debe hablar más a los sentimientos que al cerebro, de manera que pueda hablarse de sus temas aunque no los hayamos conocido nunca, del mismo modo que un hombre puede hablar de las herramientas cuyos nombres conoce, aunque no las haya visto nunca ni manejado jamás. He oído muchos sermones en mi vida, pues acompañaba a menudo a Seth para oír a los predicadores de nuestro país, desde la edad de dieciséis años, y quedaba muy perplejo oyendo a los arminianos y a los calvinistas. Los wesleyanos, como ya sabe usted, eran partidarios de los arminianos, y Seth, que no pudo soportar nunca la severidad y que creyó siempre en el progreso moral, se pronunció enseguida por los wesleyanos. Yo no me decidía, y un día discutí con uno de mis maestros de Treddleston. Y tanto lo apremié por todos lados, que acabó diciéndome: «Amigo mío: el diablo se sirve de tu orgullo y de tu presunción como de una espada guerrera contra la sencillez de la verdad».

»En aquella época, sólo fui capaz de echarme a reír, pero después comprobé que aquel hombre tenía razón. Comencé a ver que ese modo de volver y revolver el significado de tal o cual texto no constituye una parte esencial de la religión. Pasaremos horas y más horas sutilizando sobre esos temas, y saldremos de ello más aturdidos y preocupados que antes. Decidí, pues, no ir a ningún otro sitio, y acostumbrarme a frecuentar la iglesia parroquial, a oír a monseñor Irwine, pues cuanto decía era bueno y apropiado para hacernos mejores, a fuerza de meditar sus palabras. Me pareció que lo mejor para el bien de mi alma era situarme humildemente ante los misterios de los caminos de Dios, en vez de charlar sin descanso de cosas que no podía comprender. Hay que tener en cuenta que son cuestiones enrevesadas, y, después de todo, ¿hay algo, dentro o fuera de nosotros, que no nos venga de Dios? Si tomamos la decisión de obrar bien, es debido a que Él nos la inspiró en un momento dado, pero comprendo claramente que no podremos hacerlo nunca sin una firme voluntad, y esto me basta.

Adam, como veis, era un cálido admirador, quizá un juez parcial del señor Irwine, como, afortunadamente, lo somos todos de aquellos con los cuales hemos convivido familiarmente. Sin duda que esa admiración será objeto de desprecio, como si de una debilidad se tratara, por elevadas inteligencias que aspiran a un ideal y, por otro lado, viven oprimidas en la convicción de que sus impresiones son demasiado exquisitas para encontrar a personas dignas de ellas entre sus semejantes de cada día. En ciertas ocasiones pude considerar esos caracteres escogidos, y saqué la convicción de que contribuyen a demostrar que los grandes hombres son apreciados en demasía, mientras que los mediocres son tenidos en excesivo menosprecio. Si queréis conservar vuestra fe en el heroísmo humano, no hagáis nunca ninguna peregrinación para contemplar a un héroe. Confieso que a menudo evité cobardemente confesar mi propia experiencia a esos espíritus perfectos y sutiles. Creo que incluso llegué a aprobar su conducta con una sonrisa hipócrita, o que les animé con un epigrama sobre la naturaleza cambiante de nuestras ilusiones, cosa que cualquier persona, un poco al corriente de la literatura francesa, puede hacer en cualquier momento. La conversación, como supongo habrán observado algunos sabios, no es siempre honradamente sincera. Pero, en descargo de mi conciencia, declaro que experimenté verdaderos impulsos entusiastas de admiración por buenos ancianos que hablaban un inglés horrible, que a veces tenían el carácter huraño, y que no actuaron nunca en una esfera de acción superior a la de los inspectores parroquiales, por ejemplo.

Pero lo que me ayudó a comprender que la naturaleza humana merece ser amada, que me enseñó algo de su profunda elocuencia y de sus sublimes misterios, fue vivir mucho con gentes más o menos vulgares y sin imaginación, de cuyos labios quizá no escucharíais nada que fuera muy notable si os informarais entre sus vecinos. Se puede apostar diez contra uno que los tenderos que los rodean no vieron absolutamente nada de particular en ellos. Observé que esas naturalezas escogidas que aspiran al ideal y que no encuentran en lo que las rodea nada suficientemente grande para obtener su respeto o su amor, se parecen especialmente a las naturalezas más cerradas y mezquinas. Por ejemplo, a menudo oí al señor Gedge, el posadero del Royal Oak, que tenía por costumbre mirar con desprecio a sus vecinos de la aldea de Shepperton, resumir su opinión sobre ellos, que eran las únicas gentes que conocía, con estas enfáticas palabras: «¡Ah, señor, ya se lo dije a menudo, y se lo repetiré: en esta parroquia sólo tenemos a pobres diablos, sí, señor: pobres diablos, grandes y pequeños!».

Creo que tenía una idea confusa de que, si se hubiese marchado a alguna otra parroquia lejana, habría encontrado a vecinos dignos de él. Efectivamente, se trasladó más tarde al
Saracen’s
Head, un establecimiento floreciente, en una calleja lejana de una pequeña aldea próxima. Pero, cosa original: encontró a las gentes de aquella calle precisamente iguales a las de Shepperton: «Pobres diablos, señor, pobres diablos grandes y pequeños. Y los que consumen mucho no valen más que los que sólo consumen por algunos centavos. Todos ellos, pobres diablos, señor…».

XVIII

La iglesia

¡Hetty! ¡Hetty! ¿No sabes que la función de iglesia empieza a las dos, y ya es la una y media? ¿No tienes nada mejor en que pensar hoy domingo, cuando van a enterrar al pobre Mathias Bede, que se ahogó en plena noche, lo cual es bastante para hacer estremecerse a cualquiera, menos a ti, por lo visto, que sólo piensas en acicalarte como si tuvieras que asistir a una boda y no a un entierro?

—El caso es, tía —contestó Hetty—, que no he podido estar lista al mismo tiempo que los demás porque antes he tenido que ocuparme de las cosas de Totty. Y no sabes lo que me ha costado lograr que se estuviese quieta.

Hetty bajaba entonces la escalera y la señora Poyser, que llevaba un chal y un gorro muy sencillos, estaba de pie en la parte inferior. Si alguna vez una joven pareció hecha de rosas, sin duda fue Hetty vestida con el traje y con el sombrero de los domingos. El sombrero tenía adornos rosas, y en cuanto al traje, era de color blanco con manchas también rosas. En toda su persona no había otros colores que blanco y rosa, a excepción de su cabello oscuro, sus ojos y sus zapatitos con hebillas. La señora Poyser se enfadó consigo misma porque apenas pudo contener una sonrisa, como le ocurre a cualquier mortal que contempla alguna cosa muy hermosa y agradable. Por eso se volvió sin decir nada y fue a reunirse con el grupo que esperaba más allá de la puerta de la casa. Hetty la siguió y estaba tan excitada pensando en una persona a quien esperaba ver en la iglesia, que apenas sentía el suelo que pisaba.

El grupo emprendió la marcha. El señor Poyser llevaba su traje de los domingos de color pardo, con chaleco rojo y verde, cruzado por una cinta también verde a la que estaba unido un gran sello de cornalina colgando del extremo en que se hallaba su reloj de bolsillo; llevaba un pañuelo de seda de tono amarillento en tomo al cuello y unas excelentes medias grises de punto acanalado, hechas por la señora Poyser en persona y que hacían resaltar la robustez de sus pantorrillas. El señor Poyser no tenía ninguna razón para avergonzarse de ellas y sospechaba que el creciente abuso de las botas altas y de otras modas que tendían a disimular los miembros tenían su origen en una desagradable degeneración de las piernas. Menos razones tenía aún para avergonzarse de su redonda y risueña cara, que era la imagen del buen humor, cuando dijo «Ven, Hetty. Venid, pequeños», y, dando el brazo a su mujer, inició la marcha atravesando la puerta en dirección al patio.

Los pequeños aludidos por su padre eran Marty y Tommy, muchachos de nueve y siete años respectivamente, que llevaban unas chaquetitas de fustán provistas de cola y pantalones cortos. Ambos hermanos tenían las mejillas sonrosadas y los ojos negros. Se parecían tanto a su padre como los elefantes cachorros se asemejan a sus mayores. Hetty iba entre ellos y detrás la seguía la paciente Molly, cuyo deber consistía en llevar a Totty en brazos mientras atravesaban la era y cuando pasaran por los sitios encharcados del camino; pues Totty, que se había restablecido rápidamente de la fiebre que la amenazaba, insistió en querer ir aquel día a la iglesia y especialmente en llevar su collar rojo y negro por encima de su esclavina. Y aquella tarde encontraron muchos charcos que obligaron a Molly a coger en brazos a la niña, pues, en efecto, por la mañana habían caído varios chaparrones y las nubes aún se amontonaban y formaban plateadas masas en el horizonte.

Si el lector hubiera podido verse de pronto en la era de la granja, ni por un momento habría dejado de comprender que era domingo. Los gallos y las gallinas parecían notarlo tan bien que apenas emitían algún apagado cacareo, incluso el *bull-dog* parecía ser menos salvaje y estar dispuesto a contentarse con un mordisco menor que de costumbre. En cuanto a la luz del sol, brillaba de un modo especial, como si

recomendase a todo el mundo el descanso y no el trabajo; ella misma dormitaba sobre el cobertizo de vacas cubierto de musgo, sobre el grupo de blancos ánades que descansaban juntos con los picos debajo de sus alas, sobre la vieja y negra marrana, lánguidamente tendida en la paja, mientras que el mayor de sus hijos había hallado un excelente lecho de muelles en las carnosas costillas de su madre; sobre Alick, el pastor, que llevaba un traje nuevo y se entregaba a una siesta interrumpida con frecuencia sentado en los escalones del hórreo. Alick opinaba que la iglesia, a semejanza de otros lujos, no era cosa de la que pudiese abusar el hombre que tuviese la cabeza ocupada por las ovejas y por el tiempo. «¿La iglesia? Otras cosas me quitan el sueño», contestaba con cierta amargura que impedía cualquier nueva pregunta. Estoy seguro de que Alick no pretendía siquiera expresarse con irreverencia. Por el contrario, estoy persuadido de que no era un hombre sin religión y que por nada del mundo habría dejado de ir a la iglesia el día de Navidad, por Pascua de Pentecostés y por Pascua de Resurrección. Pero tenía la impresión general de que las ceremonias religiosas, así como otros empleos no productivos, estaban destinadas a las personas a quienes les sobraba el tiempo.

—Ya está padre en pie, en la puerta de la era —dijo Martin Poyser—. Sin duda quiere observarnos mientras atravesamos el campo. Es maravilloso que tenga tan buena vista a los setenta y cinco años.

—Muchas veces me he dicho que a los viejos les pasa lo mismo que a los niños —contestó la señora Poyser—. Les gusta mirarlo todo, sea lo que sea. Es muy probable que éste sea uno de los medios de que se vale el Todopoderoso para calmarles antes de dormir.

El viejo Martin abrió el portón al ver que se aproximaba el grupo familiar y lo sostuvo abierto con su bastón, contento de poder realizar este pequeño trabajo, pues, como a todos los viejos cuya existencia ha sido laboriosamente vivida, le gustaba que creyesen que todavía era útil, que en el huerto era mayor la cosecha de cebollas porque la siembra se había hecho ante sus ojos y que las vacas se dejarían ordeñar mejor si él se quedaba en casa el domingo por la tarde para vigilar la operación. Asistía siempre a la iglesia en los domingos sacramentales, pero no muy regularmente en las demás ocasiones; los domingos lluviosos o cuando tenía un poco de reuma, solía leer los tres primeros capítulos del Génesis.

—Cuando lleguéis al cementerio, ya habrán enterrado a Mathias Bede —dijo al aparecer su hijo—. Habría sido mejor que lo enterraran por la mañana, cuando llovía. Ahora ya no hay probabilidad de que vuelva a llover y la luna brilla en el cielo. Esto es una señal de buen tiempo. Hay muchas que son falsas, pero ésta no.

—Sí —contestó su hijo—. Espero que ahora el tiempo se sostendrá.

—Escuchad lo que diga el párroco, hijos míos —dijo el abuelo a los nietos de ojos negros y pantalones cortos, que llevaban en el bolsillo una o dos bolitas de mármol con las que se proponían jugar en secreto durante el sermón.

—Adiós, abuelito —dijo Totty. —Yo voy a la iglesia y llevo el collar. Dame un penique.

El abuelo se echó a reír al oír las palabras de la niña, pasó lentamente el bastón a la mano izquierda mientras sostenía la puerta abierta, y muy despacio introdujo un dedo en el bolsillo del chaleco en que Totty había puesto sus ojos con mirada esperanzada.

Y en cuanto todos se hubieron marchado, el anciano se inclinó de nuevo sobre la jamba de la puerta observándolos mientras seguían el camino a lo largo de la cerca hasta que atravesaron el lejano portón y desaparecieron, poco más allá, en un recodo del camino. Los setos ocultaban en aquella época la vista del paisaje aun en las granjas más productivas. Y aquella tarde, las rosas silvestres exhibían sus pétalos rosados, las dulcamaras lucían sus colores amarillo y purpúreo, las pálidas madreselvas crecían fuera del alcance de la mano, asomándose a cierta altura, desde una mata de acebo, y, de vez en cuando, un sicómoro ceniciento proyectaba su sombra a través del sendero.

En todas las puertas que atravesaron hallaron distracción: en la de Home Close encontraron la mitad de las vacas formadas en fila, mostrando la mayor torpeza para comprender que estorbaban el paso; en la puerta más lejana vieron a la yegua asomando la cabeza por encima del vallado y, junto a ella, el potro de color de hígado, con la cabeza dirigida al costado de su madre y, al parecer, muy preocupado por su propia existencia.

El camino atravesaba de un extremo a otro los campos del señor Poyser hasta llegar al portón principal que conducía al pueblo. El señor Poyser volvió la cabeza para contemplar el ganado y los campos, mientras que su mujer se disponía a pronunciar un largo discurso a cuantos la acompañaban. La mujer que dirige una lechería influye notablemente en las ganancias de la granja y puede gozar del permiso de opinar sobre el ganado y el modo de cuidarlo, y este ejercicio refuerza de tal modo su comprensión que incluso es capaz de aconsejar a su marido en otras cosas.

—Aquí está esa Sally de cuernos cortos —dijo cuando entraban en el Home Close y descubrieron al

pequeño animal, que estaba pastando y los miró con ojos soñolientos—. Ya empieza a cansarme esta vaca, y digo ahora lo mismo que tres semanas atrás, o sea, que cuanto antes nos desprendamos de ella, mejor, porque ahí tenemos a esa otra de color amarillo que, aun sin dar la mitad de leche, me proporciona una cantidad mucho mayor de manteca.

—Tú no eres como las demás mujeres —observó Poyser—. Pues en general les gustan las reses de cuernos cortos, que dan abundancia de leche. Por ejemplo, aquí tienes a la mujer de Chowne, que no quiere otras.

—¿Y qué importa lo que le guste a la mujer de Chowne? —replicó la señora Poyser—. De sobra sabes que esa desgraciada apenas tiene más inteligencia que un gorrión. Por mi parte, te aseguro que jamás tomaré un criado que haya estado en su casa. Fíjate en que cuando vas allí nunca podrías adivinar en qué día de la semana estamos, pues la colada se arrastra durante toda la semana, y en cuanto al queso que hace, no me gusta nada. Y luego ella le echa la culpa al tiempo, lo mismo que si un estúpido se pusiera cabeza abajo y echara la culpa de ello a sus botas.

—Pues, mira, Chowne quiere comprar a Sally, de modo que si te parece bien podremos desprendernos de ella —dijo el señor Poyser interiormente entusiasmado por la superior inteligencia de su mujer. Ya en los días de mercado más de una vez se había envanecido de su discernimiento acerca de las reses vacunas de corta cornamenta.

—Sí. El que ha tomado por esposa a una tonta, bien puede comprar esas vacas. Pero mira qué bien anda Totty ahora —añadió la orgullosa madre al ver que la niña trotaba ante ellos por estar seco el camino—. Estoy segura de que se va a parecer mucho a ti.

—Dentro de diez años será tan bonita como Hetty, aunque sus ojos se parecen a los tuyos. En mi familia nunca hubo ojos azules, y mi madre los tenía negros como los de Hetty.

—Ten la seguridad de que no por diferenciarse de Hetty será peor ni más fea nuestra hijita. No me gustaría que fuese demasiado guapa. De todos modos, recuerda que hay personas que tienen el cabello rubio y los ojos azules, y que no por eso son menos hermosas que si los tuvieran negros. Si Dinah tuviese las mejillas sonrosadas y no llevase aquel gorro de metodista capaz de dar un susto al miedo, tal vez sería considerada tan guapa como la misma Hetty.

—Te engañas —replicó el señor Poyser con desdeñoso énfasis—. Veo que no conoces lo que ha de tener una mujer para ser hermosa. Los hombres nunca andarían detrás de Dinah como van detrás de Hetty.

—¿Y a mí qué me importa eso? ¡Pues vaya que los hombres eligen bien! No tienes más que ver las mujeres que toman. Parecen cintas rojas que no sirven para nada en cuanto pierden el color.

—Supongo que no tendrás nada que decir de la elección que hice al casarme yo —contestó el señor Poyser que solía terminar las discusiones conyugales con un cumplido parecido—. Y tú, hace diez años, estabas dos veces más rolliza que Dinah.

—Nunca he dicho que la mujer tuviese que ser fea para ser buena ama de casa. Aquí tienes, por ejemplo a la mujer de Chowne, que, pese a ser lo bastante fea para que se corte la leche al verla, no sirve absolutamente para nada. La pobre Dinah, en cambio, no engordará mientras coma tan poco para poder dar grandes limosnas. Algunas veces he llegado a enojarme con ella y así se lo dije un día en que me indicó que las Escrituras ordenan amar al prójimo como a nosotros mismos. Y yo le repliqué: «Si tú no quisieras al prójimo más que a ti misma, poco podrías hacer por él, porque no creo que nadie se conformase con vivir tan pobremente como tú». ¿Qué hará hoy domingo? Seguramente estará sentada a la cabecera de aquella enferma.

—Es una lástima que se haya metido todas esas tonterías en la cabeza, porque, de lo contrario, podría haber pasado con nosotros todo el verano y comer doble de lo que necesita sin perjudicarnos en lo más mínimo. Y en casa no molestaba nada en absoluto, pues se pasaba el día cosiendo y en silencio, aunque, por otra parte, era la primera en echar a correr cuando convenía ir a buscar algo. Si Hetty se casara, estoy seguro de que te gustaría tener siempre contigo a Dinah.

—No hay que pensar en eso —dijo la señora Poyser—. Nunca convenceríamos a Dinah de que viniese a vivir con nosotros. Si alguien fuese capaz de convencerla, estoy segura de que lo habría conseguido yo, pues a veces le he hablado durante una hora entera, y hasta la he regañado; es la única hija de mi hermana y, por consiguiente, tengo el deber de hacer por ella cuanto pueda. Pero en cuanto la pobrecilla nos hubo dicho adiós y subió en el coche, se volvió a mirarme con su rostro pálido, tan parecido al de su tía Judith, y entonces lamenté las reprimendas que le había dirigido, pues a veces me parece que sabe mejor que yo lo que debe hacerse en este mundo. Sin embargo, no creo que eso se deba a que es metodista.

—Por mi parte —contestó el señor Poyser con todo el malhumor que le consentía su buen carácter—, no quiero mucho a los metodistas. Solamente lo son los comerciantes, pues nunca he visto a un granjero que se

haya convertido al metodismo. Puede ser que a algún obrero le dé la manía de serlo, como le ocurre a Seth Bede, que no es demasiado buen operario. En cambio, fíjate en Adam, que es uno de los mejores obreros que tenemos por aquí. No hay cuidado de que se haga metodista, aunque asiste a la iglesia con regularidad. Y como veo que es un muchacho muy sensato, nunca le he alentado para que sostenga relaciones amorosas con Hetty.

—¡Dios mío! —exclamó la señora Poyser que, mientras su marido hablaba, volvió la cabeza hacía atrás —. Mira dónde está Molly con los niños. Al menos a diez minutos de distancia. ¿Por qué les has dejado quedarse atrás de ese modo, Hetty? Pedir a un espantapájaros que cuide a los niños sería lo mismo que encargártelo a ti. Ve a buscarles y diles que se adelanten.

El matrimonio Poyser estaba entonces en el extremo del segundo campo, de modo que sentaron a Totty en una de las piedras del portillo y esperaron a los rezagados. Mientras tanto la niña canturreaba con complacencia: «Los niños son tontos, y yo soy muy buena».

La causa del retraso se debía a que en aquel paseo dominguero a través de los campos, Marty y Tommy hallaron grandes motivos de interés en las infinitas cosas que ocurrían entre las matas, de modo que no podían abstenerse de mirar a cada momento como si fuesen perros de caza. Marty estaba seguro de haber visto un pájaro carpintero entre las ramas de un fresno, y mientras lo buscaba le pasó por alto un gran sapo que atravesó el sendero y fue descrito con el mayor fervor por el pequeño Tommy. Luego vieron un verderón apenas emplumecido que daba saltitos por el suelo, y como les pareció posible cogerlo, se metieron por debajo de unas moras. Hetty no les hacía caso, y en vista de eso los niños llamaron a Molly que, con la boca abierta, les ayudaba en sus pesquisas en cuanto los niños le indicaban la conveniencia de realizarlas.

Molly avanzó con cierta alarma al ver que Hetty volvía para decirles que su tía estaba enfadada; pero Marty echó a correr el primero, gritando al mismo tiempo con la instintiva confianza de que jamás recibe una regañina la persona que es portadora de una buena noticia:

—¡Hemos encontrado el nido de la pava moteada, madre!

—¡Ah! —dijo la señora Poyser olvidando su enfado ante aquella agradable nueva—. Eres un buen niño. ¿Dónde lo has encontrado?

—En ese agujero que hay debajo de las matas. Yo he sido el primero en verlo, mientras buscaba un verderón. He encontrado a la pava echada allí.

—Espero que no la habrás asustado —observó la madre—, pues puede marcharse.

—No, me he alejado sin hacer ruido, y se lo he dicho a Molly. ¿Verdad, Molly?

—Bueno, bueno; vamos —dijo la señora Poyser—. Y ahora id delante de vuestros padres, llevando a Totty cogida de la mano. Conviene no perder tiempo. Los niños buenos dejan en paz a los pájaros el domingo.

—Pero, madre —dijo Marty—, tú nos prometiste media corona si encontrábamos el nido en la pava. ¿No querrás meter la media corona en mi hucha?

—Ya veremos lo que pasa, si andas como es debido y te portas bien.

El padre y la madre cambiaron una significativa mirada de orgullo por la agudeza de su hijo mayor y, mientras tanto, por el redondo semblante de Tommy pasó una nube.

—Madre —dijo casi llorando—. Marty tiene mucho más dinero que yo en su hucha.

—¡Mamá! Yo también quiero media corona —dijo Totty.

—¡Callad! —contestó la señora Poyser—. Sois unos niños tontos. Y si ahora no andáis deprisa hacia la iglesia, no volveréis a ver vuestras huchas.

Esta amenaza horrorosa produjo el efecto deseado y, mientras atravesaban los dos campos siguientes, los tres pares de piernecitas siguieron caminando sin nueva interrupción, a pesar de haber pasado por el lado de un charco lleno de ranas, a las que los niños miraron con el mayor interés.

El heno húmedo debería ser extendido al día siguiente, cosa que no era del gusto del señor Poyser, quien durante las cosechas del heno y del trigo solía sostener algunas luchas mentales pensando en los beneficios que obtendría trabajando en un día de descanso, pero ninguna tentación habría sido bastante fuerte para hacerle trabajar en domingo. ¿Acaso a Michael Holdsworth no se le murieron de calor dos bueyes por haber arado en Viernes Santo? Eso era una demostración palpable de que el trabajar en los días sagrados constituía un grave pecado; y Martin Poyser comprendía muy bien que era preciso abstenerse de ello, porque el dinero ganado de esa manera no servía para nada.

—Cuando uno ve el heno en el campo y con el sol brillante como ahora, apenas puede contener, el deseo de darle la vuelta para que se seque mejor —observó al pasar por el mayor de sus prados—. Pero es una tontería querer ganar dinero a costa de perder la conciencia. Tenemos, por ejemplo, a Jim Wakefield, que

trabajaba en domingo como si fuese día laborable y sin pensar en Dios ni en el diablo. ¿Y qué le ha ocurrido? Pues que el último día de mercado le vi convertido en un pordiosero.

—No hay duda —contestó la señora Poyser—. Jamás se tiene suerte obrando mal. Parece como si el dinero ganado así agujerease los bolsillos. No quisiera nunca que mis hijos ganasen seis peniques de un modo poco honrado o respetuoso para con Dios. Y en cuanto al tiempo, Nuestro Señor es quien lo gobierna y no debemos dudar de su bondad.

A pesar de la interrupción en su camino, la excelente costumbre del reloj de la señora Poyser, que adelantaba considerablemente, les permitió llegar al pueblo a las dos menos cuarto, aunque ya encontraron en la puerta del cementerio a todos los que se disponían a ir a la iglesia. En sus casas quedaron solamente algunas mujeres, como Bess Timothy, que estaba en la puerta amamantando a su hijo y muy convencida de que no podía ocuparse de nada más.

No se debía tan sólo al deseo de asistir al entierro de Mathias Bede el hecho de que la gente se hubiera puesto a esperar en la puerta del cementerio a que empezara la ceremonia, sino que lo hacían por la fuerza de la costumbre. Las mujeres solían entrar enseguida en la iglesia, donde empezaban a chismorrear y a hablar de sus enfermedades y del fracaso de los remedios del médico, recomendándose mutuamente remedios caseros, que resultaban mucho mejores; o a criticar a las criadas, por sus exigencias con respecto al salario, mientras que sus servicios eran cada vez peores, hasta el punto de que ya no era posible fiarse de que una criada realizara bien su trabajo si el ama no estaba delante; hablaban también de lo poco que el señor Dingall, el abacero de Treddleston, pagaba por la manteca, y las dudas razonables que había sobre su solvencia, a pesar de que la señora Dingall era una mujer excelente a quien todo el mundo compadecía. Mientras tanto, los hombres permanecían en el exterior y muy pocos entraban en la iglesia, a excepción de los coristas, que en voz baja ensayaban sus salmos, hasta que no hacía su aparición el mismo señor Irwine. Los campesinos no veían que existiese ninguna razón para entrar antes, porque ¿qué harían en la iglesia antes de empezar el servicio? Y no concebían que un poder cualquiera del universo pudiese pensar que estaba mal permanecer al aire libre hablando de sus negocios.

Chad Cranage parecía otro hombre, pues llevaba la cara limpia de los domingos, y eso era causa de que su nieta se echara a llorar al verlo, porque no le conocía. Sin embargo, una mirada experimentada lo hubiese reconocido en el acto como el herrero del pueblo, después de fijarse en la humilde deferencia con que aquel individuo enorme se quitaba el sombrero y se acariciaba el cabello para saludar a algún granjero, porque Chad solía decir que un trabajador debía respetar a todos aquellos que tuviesen caballos susceptibles de ser herrados. Chad y los obreros más rudos de la comunidad se hallaban a cierta distancia de la tumba abierta junto al espino blanco en la que sería enterrado el difunto Mathias Bede, pero Sandy Jim y varios labradores formaron un grupo a su alrededor y permanecían allí con las cabezas descubiertas como parte del duelo junto a la viuda y los hijos. Otros se habían situado en un lugar intermedio para poder observar al grupo más próximo a la tumba y escuchar a la vez las conversaciones de los granjeros congregados cerca de la puerta de la iglesia. Con éstos se reunió Martin Poyser, mientras que su familia penetraba en la iglesia; allí se hallaba el señor Casson, propietario del Donnithorne Arms, adoptando su actitud más imponente, es decir, con el índice de su mano derecha entre los botones de su levitón, la mano izquierda en el bolsillo de los pantalones y la cabeza ladeada; en conjunto, tenía el aspecto de un actor a quien se ha confiado un papel pequeñísimo y, sin embargo, está persuadido de que el público se fijará en sus grandes dotes artísticas; y ofrecía un curioso contraste con el viejo Jonathan Burge que, con las manos a la espalda, se inclinaba hacia adelante, tosiendo como los asmáticos, mientras en su fuero interno despreciaba todo conocimiento que no pudiese ser convertido en dinero. Aquel día se hablaba en voz más baja que de costumbre, y las voces de los asistentes se dejaban dominar por la del señor Irwine, que leía las últimas oraciones del servicio fúnebre. Todos pronunciaron alguna palabra de compasión por el pobre Mathias, pero después empezaron a tratar de un asunto que les interesaba mucho más, o sea de los agravios que les causaba Satchell, el mayordomo del caballero, que desempeñaba el papel de administrador y recaudador en cuanto se lo permitía el viejo señor Donnithorne, cuya ruindad llegaba hasta el punto de cobrar las rentas por sí mismo y hacer negocios con su propia madera. El asunto de la conversación contribuía a que no se hablase en voz alta, puesto que Satchell en persona podía presentarse de un momento a otro por el camino enlosado frente a la puerta de la iglesia. De repente se quedaron todos en silencio, pues la voz del señor Irwine había cesado ya y el grupo que rodeaba el espino blanco se dispersaba hacia la iglesia.

Todos se hicieron a un lado y se quedaron con las cabezas descubiertas mientras pasaba el señor Irwine. Tras él iban Adam y Seth acompañando a su madre; Joshua Rann oficiaba de enterrador y de sacristán y aún no estaba listo para seguir al rector a la sacristía. Pero hubo una pausa antes de que se acercara a la iglesia la familia del difunto, pues Lisbeth se volvió para contemplar de nuevo la tumba. ¡Ah! Ya no se veía

nada más que el espino blanco. Sin embargo, aquel día había llorado menos que en los anteriores, mientras el cadáver de su marido permaneció en casa. Y a pesar de su dolor, experimentaba una sensación desacostumbrada de su propia importancia por tener un «entierro» y porque el señor Irwine en persona hubiese leído el oficio de difuntos para su marido; además, le constaba que en breve cantarían el salmo de difuntos para el muerto. Y esta excitación la embargó hasta dominar su dolor mientras, en compañía de sus hijos, se dirigía a la puerta de la iglesia, percibiendo los gestos de simpatía de que era objeto por parte de sus vecinos.

La madre y los hijos penetraron en la iglesia seguidos por los curiosos, aunque algunos se quedaron fuera; el hecho de que el coche del señor Donnithorne descendiera despacio por la pendiente de la colina contribuyó tal vez a darles la impresión de que no había necesidad de apresurarse. De pronto se oyeron el fagot y las trompetas; era el himno de la tarde que siempre daba comienzo al servicio, y todos debían entrar para ocupar sus respectivos sitios. No puedo decir que el interior de la iglesia de Haylope fuese notable por nada especial, a excepción de la antigüedad de sus bancos de roble. La mayor parte eran de grandes dimensiones y escuadrados, y estaban alineados a cada uno de los lados de la estrecha nave. Allí no había ninguna de las imperfecciones típicas de las modernas galerías. El coro ocupaba dos bancos situados hacia el centro de la fila de la derecha, de modo que a Joshua no le resultó difícil encontrar su sitio como bajo principal entre los demás cantores, para volver a su pupitre una vez terminado el canto. El púlpito y el pupitre, tan viejos y grises como los bancos, se hallaban a un lado del arco que conducía al presbiterio, donde también había unos bancos grises y escuadrados para la familia y los criados del señor Donnithorne. Sin embargo, puedo asegurar al lector que aquellos bancos grises y los muros de color pardo formaban un fondo muy agradable que armonizaba con los enrojecidos rostros y los chalecos de colores brillantes. Hacia el presbiterio se advertían algunas notas de color carmesí, pues el púlpito y el banco del señor Donnithorne estaban adornados con unos almohadones de este color; y para terminar la descripción, diremos que el altar se hallaba cubierto con un paño, también carmesí, en el que la señorita Lydia había bordado unos rayos dorados.

Pero aun sin el paño carmesí el efecto habría sido cálido y alegre cuando el señor Irwine se sentó ante su pupitre mirando con benevolencia a aquella sencilla congregación de fieles: a los duros ancianos de rodillas y espaldas encorvadas, aunque todavía con el vigor suficiente para dedicarse a pequeños trabajos rústicos; a los picapedreros y carpinteros de cuerpos robustos y rudos y rostros bronceados; a la media docena de granjeros ricos rodeados por sus esposas e hijos, todos ellos de sonrosadas mejillas, y a las limpias ancianas, esposas de los labradores, con las cabezas cubiertas con gorros negros ribeteados de blanco y los arrugados brazos desnudos hasta el codo y lánguidamente doblados sobre sus pechos. Ninguno de los viejos sostenía un libro en las manos, pues no sabían leer. Sin embargo, conocían algunas oraciones y a veces movían los labios en silencio, siguiendo el servicio religioso aunque no lo acabaran de comprender del todo; todos ellos tenían una fe sencilla, eficaz y digna de ser bendecida. Cuando todo el mundo se puso en pie y los niños se subieron a los bancos para contemplar la escena, mientras se cantaba el himno de la tarde del obispo Ken, todas las caras fueron visibles. Luego continuaron con uno de aquellos hermosos salmos que murieron con la última generación de rectores y de cantores eclesiásticos. Las melodías se extinguen, como la flauta de Pan, al mismo tiempo que los oídos que las escucharon. Aquel día Adam no formaba parte de los cantores, pues estaba sentado al lado de su madre y de Seth, y observó con sorpresa la ausencia de Barde Massey, lo cual resultaba muy agradable para el señor Joshua Rann, que emitía su voz de bajo con complacencia y dirigía miradas severas, por encima de sus anteojos, hacia el recusante Will Maskery.

Imagínese el lector al señor Irwine mientras contemplaba aquella escena, vestido con el amplio sobrepelliz que le sentaba tan bien, con el cabello empolvado y peinado hacia atrás, con el cutis moreno y sonrosado y la nariz y los labios muy bien dibujados. Porque había cierta virtud en aquella mirada benigna y severa a un tiempo, como en todos los rostros humanos en que resplandece un alma generosa. E imagínese la escena iluminada por el magnífico sol de junio, que atravesaba las antiguas ventanas proyectando manchas amarillas, rojas y azules sobre la pared opuesta.

Creo que cuando el señor Irwine miraba a sus feligreses, sus ojos se detuvieron más de lo corriente en el banco ocupado por Martin Poyser y su familia. Y había también otros ojos negros que no podían mirar a otro lugar y que se fijaban en aquella graciosa figura vestida de blanco y rosa. Sin embargo, Hetty no pensaba entonces en ninguna mirada, porque estaba absorbida por la idea de que Arthur Donnithorne entraría pronto en la iglesia, ya que en ese mismo momento, sin duda, llegaba el carruaje a la puerta. No había vuelto a verlo desde que se separó de él en el bosque el jueves por la noche. ¡Y qué largo le había parecido el tiempo desde entonces! Desde aquella hora dichosa, todo había ido como de costumbre; las maravillas que habían ocurrido entonces no trajeron ningún cambio a su vida y le parecía no haber sino

vivido un sueño. Al oír que se abría la puerta de la iglesia, su corazón latió de tal modo que no se atrevió siquiera a levantar los ojos. Le pareció que su tía hacía una reverencia y ella la imitó. Sin duda se trataba del viejo señor Donnithorne, pues aquel hombre anciano, arrugado y de corta estatura, que con mirada miope contemplaba a la congregación que le saludaba, solía ser siempre el primero en entrar; luego supuso que llegaba la señorita Lydia, y aunque a Hetty le habría gustado contemplar su gorrito parecido a un cubo de carbón rodeado de rosas pequeñitas, se abstuvo de mirarlo aquel día. Pero no saludó nadie más. Era evidente que él no había llegado.

Estaba segura de que ya no entraría nadie más que el ama de llaves con su gorro negro, y la doncella con su hermoso sombrero de paja que, en otro tiempo, perteneció a la señorita Lydia, y además el mayordomo y el lacayo con el cabello empolvado. No, él no estaba allí. Sin embargo, se disponía a cerciorarse, pues podía estar equivocada; así que levantó con timidez los ojos y dirigió la mirada hacia el banco del presbiterio provisto de almohadones. Allí no había nadie más que el viejo señor Donnithorne, que en aquel momento limpiaba sus anteojos con un pañuelo blanco, y la señorita Lydia, que abría un libro de oraciones muy grande con los cantos dorados. Era muy duro de soportar aquel frío desencanto; se sintió palidecer, le temblaron los labios y le entraron ganas de llorar. ¡Oh! ¿Qué estaba haciendo? Todo el mundo comprendería la razón y se daría cuenta de que lloraba por la ausencia de Arthur Donnithorne. Según pudo advertir, el señor Craig, que llevaba en el ojal una hermosa flor, la miraba en aquel momento. El tiempo se le hizo eterno antes de que empezase la confesión general que le permitiría arrodillarse. Entonces podría derramar dos grandes lágrimas, pero nadie, salvo la buena de Molly, la vería, pues sus tíos estarían arrodillados delante de ella. Y Molly, incapaz de explicarse la causa de las lágrimas en la iglesia, y pensando que se deberían a una debilidad imprevista, de la que tenía un conocimiento vago y tradicional, sacó del bolsillo un frasquito de forma rara y aplanada y, después de forcejear un rato para destaparlo, lo acercó a la nariz de Hetty. «No huele», murmuró, creyendo que eso constituiría una ventaja que esas sales, ya pasadas, tendrían sobre las frescas. «Y te harán mucho bien, sin perjudicarte». Hetty le apartó la mano, pero aquel estallido de malhumor logró lo que no podían haber logrado las sales, pues se limpió las lágrimas y se obligó a no derramar ninguna más. Su vanidosa naturaleza daba a Hetty cierta fuerza, pues por nada del mundo habría consentido que se riesen de ella o la mirasen de otro modo que con admiración. Se habría clavado las uñas en la carne antes de que la gente pudiese descubrir alguno de sus secretos.

¡Cuántas fluctuaciones hubo en sus afanosos pensamientos y sensaciones, mientras el señor Irwine pronunciaba la solemne absolución en los sordos oídos de la joven y en la petición que siguió! La cólera estaba muy próxima a la desilusión y pronto logró la victoria sobre las conjeturas que su imaginación pudo formar para explicar la ausencia de Arthur, en la suposición de que, realmente, hubiese deseado venir y volver a verla. Y cuando se puso en pie mecánicamente, imitando a los demás, había vuelto ya el color a sus mejillas, quizá de un modo más acentuado que antes, ya que ella misma se dirigía frases indignadas, diciendo que odiaba a Arthur por haberle causado aquel disgusto; luego se propuso hacerle sufrir a su vez. Y mientras en su alma reinaban aquellos pensamientos tumultuosos, tenía los ojos fijos en su libro de oraciones y sus párpados de largas pestañas eran tan hermosos como siempre. Así lo creyó Adam Bede al mirarla un momento cuando se ponía en pie.

Pero los pensamientos de Adam acerca de Hetty no le distraían del servicio religioso, sino que más bien se confundían con todas las demás sensaciones profundas que encontraban expresión en la ceremonia, del mismo modo que el recuerdo de nuestro pasado y la imagen de nuestro futuro imaginario se confunden con todos nuestros momentos de aguda sensibilidad. Para Adam, el servicio religioso era el mejor medio de expresión que podía hallar para su pesar, sus deseos y su resignación, que se confundían en su alma, para sus suplicantes peticiones de ayuda y para la expresión de su fe y de su adoración; y todo aquello parecía hablar con él como no podría haberlo hecho ninguna otra forma de adoración, de igual modo que para los primeros cristianos que durante toda su vida adoraron a Dios en las catacumbas, la antorcha y las sombras que ésta proyectaba debieron de parecer más apropiadas que la radiante luz pagana de las calles. El secreto de nuestras emociones jamás reposa en el objeto en sí, sino en su relación sutil con nuestro pasado; no es de extrañar pues que este secreto pase inadvertido para el observador indiferente, quien del mismo modo podría ponerse los anteojos para distinguir unos olores.

Pero había una razón para que aun el observador casual pudiera considerar el servicio religioso de la iglesia de Hayslope mucho más significativo que en otra iglesia cualquiera del reino, y estoy seguro de que el lector no sospecha siquiera esta razón, pues consistía en el modo de leer de nuestro amigo Joshua Rann. Aun para sus más íntimos era un misterio dónde aprendió el buen zapatero a leer de aquel modo. Por mi parte, creo que era un don que recibió de la naturaleza, que vertió su música en su alma honrada y religiosa, como había hecho en el pasado con otras almas ignorantes o sencillas. Por lo menos le dio una

hermosa voz de bajo y un buen oído musical, aunque no puedo asegurar que estas dos dotes por sí solas bastaran para inspirarle y para que emitiese las notas armoniosas con que hacía las réplicas. Solamente al viento cuando atraviesa los matorrales, que empieza soplando con fuerza y acaba con un débil rumor, podría compararse el arte con que emitía fuertemente una nota de acento melancólico y disminuía la intensidad de la voz al terminar la última palabra, como suena a veces el violoncelo al ser tocado por una mano hábil. Tal vez parecerá raro que se hable así de un sacristán, de un hombre que llevaba unas gafas oxidadas, que tenía el cabello del color de los rastrojos y un occipucio enorme y prominente. Pero así obra siempre la naturaleza. Es capaz de dar a un caballero un rostro hermoso y la inspiración poética y, sin embargo, le hará cantar mal y fuera de tono sin que él lo advierta; y en cambio, un individuo de frente estrecha que entona una balada en el rincón de la taberna, lo hará quizás con gran entonación y un compás perfecto.

El mismo Joshua estaba menos orgulloso de su modo de leer que de su canto, y así, con expresión de orgullo satisfecho, abandonaba el pupitre para pasar al coro. Pero aquel día aun se consideraba más importante, pues era una ocasión especial: un anciano conocido en toda la parroquia había sido víctima de una triste muerte, pues sus días no acabaron en la cama, circunstancia muy penosa para un campesino, y así, el salmo de difuntos se entonaba en memoria de su repentina desaparición. Por otra parte, no estaba en la iglesia Barde Massey y gracias a ello la importancia de Joshua en el coro no quedaba eclipsada por nadie. La música que acompaña los antiguos salmos tiene acentos dolorosos, y las palabras

Desaparecemos arrastrados por la marea
y nos desvanecemos como la niebla de la tarde,

parecían tener un significado mayor que de costumbre y más exacta aplicación a la muerte del pobre Mathias. Madre e hijos escuchaban con la mayor atención y cada uno experimentaba sus propias sensaciones. Lisbeth sentía una vaga creencia de que el salmo hacía mucho bien a su marido, era una parte de un magnífico entierro cuya omisión le habría parecido más dolorosa después de muerto que el hacer desgraciados sus días mientras vivía. Cuanto más hablaran de su marido, mayor bien le harían y mejor sería la suerte que le esperara. Así era como la pobre Lisbeth sentía y creía que el amor y la compasión humanas son la base de la fe en otro amor. Seth, que se conmovía con facilidad, derramó algunas lágrimas y trató de recordar, como hiciera continuamente desde que murió su padre, todo lo que había oído acerca de que un momento de arrepentimiento es capaz de salvar el alma. Hasta entonces Adam jamás se había sentido incapaz de cantar un salmo. Desde su primera juventud conoció el dolor y las inquietudes, pero aquélla era la primera pena verdadera que había experimentado, y, por extraño que parezca, la desaparición de la causa principal de sus preocupaciones le producía dolor. No había podido estrechar la mano de su padre antes de su muerte diciéndole: «Padre, siempre nos hemos querido; nunca olvidaré lo que te debo; pero tú también perdóname si alguna vez no te he tratado como debía». Adam no recordaba ya el trabajo y el dinero que su padre le había costado, sólo pensaba en los sentimientos del pobre viejo cuando, humillado, inclinaba la cabeza ante su hijo.

«¡Ah! Yo siempre le trataba con mucha dureza —se decía Adam—. No tengo paciencia cuando la gente comete alguna falta; mi corazón se cierra a la piedad y no puedo perdonarles. Ahora comprendo que en mi alma hay más orgullo que amor, pues me era más fácil dar mil martillazos por mi padre que dirigirle una palabra bondadosa. Y en los martillazos había mucho orgullo, porque el diablo tiene tanta influencia en nuestros pecados como en lo que llamamos nuestros deberes. Siempre me pareció más fácil trabajar que estar quieto, pero mi verdadera tarea habría sido vencer mi voluntad y mi carácter y contrariar mi orgullo. Estoy persuadido de que si hoy encontrase a mi padre en casa, me portaría con él de un modo distinto. En fin, es muy posible que nada llegue a ser una lección para nosotros si no la recibimos demasiado tarde. La vida es algo que no podemos repetir y, por consiguiente, resulta imposible deshacer el mal que se ha causado».

Esas eran las ideas que rondaban al joven desde la muerte de su padre, y las tristes notas del salmo de difuntos contribuían a reforzar tales pensamientos. Lo mismo ocurrió con el sermón que el señor Irwine pronunció en el funeral de Mathias. Comentó con brevedad y sencillez las palabras: «En plena vida estamos en la muerte». Y dijo que sólo podemos aprovechar el momento actual para hacer actos de misericordia, para tratar a todos con rectitud y para demostrar la mayor ternura a nuestra familia. Todo eso eran verdades antiguas, pero muchas veces éstas nos parecen algo nuevo, después de contemplar el rostro inanimado de quien ha formado parte de nuestras propias vidas.

Llegó el momento de la bendición final, cuando las sublimes palabras «La paz de Dios, que sobrepasa

toda comprensión» parecieron confundirse con el tranquilo sol de la tarde que iluminaba las inclinadas cabezas de los fieles; luego empezaron a levantarse todos, y las madres se pusieron a atar los gorritos de las niñas que se habían dormido en el sermón, mientras que los padres recogían los libros de oraciones, hasta que todos cruzaron la antigua puerta para ir al verde cementerio y reanudar sus charlas de vecinos, sus sencillos saludos y sus invitaciones para tomar el té, pues los domingos todo el mundo estaba dispuesto a recibir a un invitado; era el día en que la gente debía ponerse su mejor traje y estar de buen humor.

El señor Poyser y su esposa se detuvieron un instante en la puerta de la iglesia; esperaban que Adam fuese a reunirse con ellos, pues no querían marcharse sin dirigir unas palabras amables a la viuda y a sus hijos.

—Bueno, señora Bede —dijo la señora Poyser, mientras andaban juntas—, debe cobrar ánimo. Los esposos han de estar contentos cuando viven lo bastante para criar a sus hijos y verse encanecer el uno al otro.

—Eso es —dijo el señor Poyser—. Entonces ya no han de esperarse mucho uno a otro. Usted tiene la suerte de que sus hijos figuren entre los muchachos mejores de la región. Aunque eso es natural, porque recuerdo al pobre Mathias, que era un muchacho robusto y de anchos hombros. Y en cuanto a usted, señora Bede, todavía tiene la espalda más recta que muchas mujeres jóvenes.

—¡Ay! —dijo Lisbeth—. Mal va el plato cuando se rompe en dos. Cuanto antes me vea bajo el espino blanco, mejor será, pues ya no sirvo para nada.

Adam nunca hacía caso de las injustas quejas de su madre, pero Seth replicó:

—No debes hablar así, porque tus hijos no tendrán otra madre.

—Es verdad, muchacho. Tienes razón —dijo el señor Poyser—. Hacemos muy mal entregándonos al dolor; igual que cuando los niños lloran porque sus padres les quitan algo. Quien está en el cielo sabe bastante más que nosotros.

—Para no hablar —añadió la señora Poyser— de que no hay que poner nunca a los muertos por encima de los vivos. Todos nosotros nos moriremos, sin duda alguna, y es mejor que nos precedan los demás en vez de empezar nosotros.

—Bueno, Adam —dijo el señor Poyser advirtiendo que las palabras de su esposa eran más incisivas que cariñosas—, espero que volverás a visitarnos. Hace mucho tiempo que no charlo contigo, y esta mujer quiere que le des un consejo para arreglar su torno de hilar, porque se le ha roto. Espero que irás a casa tan pronto como puedas, ¿verdad?

El señor Poyser hizo una pausa y miró a su alrededor mientras hablaba, buscando a Hetty, pues los niños habían echado a correr. Hetty no carecía de compañía y además estaba más blanca y sonrosada que nunca; en la mano llevaba la maravillosa planta, blanca y roja, que tenía un nombre muy largo y además escocés, según creía, ya que todo el mundo aseguraba que el señor Craig, el jardinero, era escocés. Adam aprovechó la oportunidad para mirar a su vez, y seguramente el lector comprenderá que no le disgustó observar la expresión de desagrado con que la joven escuchaba las palabras del jardinero. No obstante, en lo más profundo de su corazón, Hetty se alegraba de tener a aquel hombre a su lado, pues gracias a él podía averiguar la razón por la que Arthur no había ido a la iglesia. Desde luego no se proponía preguntárselo directamente, pero esperaba que él le diese esa noticia de un modo espontáneo, puesto que el señor Craig, como hombre superior que era, gustaba mucho de dar noticias.

El jardinero no advirtió que su conversación y sus amabilidades eran recibidas con cierta frialdad, pues desviar el propio punto de vista más allá de determinados límites es algo imposible para cualquiera, por liberal y expansiva que sea su mente. Nadie sabe la impresión que producimos en los monos brasileños, de corta inteligencia, y es muy posible que apenas se fijen en nosotros. Además, el señor Craig era un hombre de pasiones sobrias y se hallaba en su décimo año de indecisión sobre las ventajas relativas de la soltería y las del matrimonio. Es cierto que, de vez en cuando, después de caldearse con un vaso de *grog*, le habían oído decir que Hetty «estaba muy bien» y que «un hombre podría hacer lo peor». Pero ya es sabido que en tales ocasiones los hombres suelen expresarse con alguna crudeza.

Martin Poyser apreciaba mucho al señor Craig como hombre que conocía su oficio y que tenía vastos nociones sobre tipos de tierras y abonos. Pero el jardinero no estaba tan bien considerado por la señora Poyser, quien más de una vez dijo confidencialmente a su marido:

—A ti te gusta mucho ese Craig, pero, por mi parte, creo que se parece a un gallo que está convencido que el sol sale todos los días con el único objeto de oírle cantar.

Por lo demás, el señor Craig era un jardinero muy digno y no sin razón tenía una alta opinión de sí mismo. Poseía, además, anchos hombros y pómulos salientes, y cuando andaba, con las manos en los bolsillos del pantalón, solía inclinar un poco la cabeza hacia adelante. Creo que sólo por sus antepasados

tenía el privilegio de ser algo escocés, y no por haberse criado en Escocia, y aunque su acento era algo raro, su modo de hablar difería poco del de los habitantes de Loamshire. Pero un jardinero suele ser escocés, así como un maestro francés es parisiense.

—Me parece, señor Poyser —dijo antes de que el granjero tuviese tiempo de hablar—, que mañana no podrá retirar el heno. El barómetro señala un cambio y puede estar seguro de que volverá a llover antes de veinticuatro horas. Fíjese en esa nube oscura que hay en el horizonte. Ya sabe que por horizonte se entiende la línea en que parecen juntarse el cielo y la tierra.

—Sí, ya veo una nube —contestó el señor Poyser— en el horizonte. Está encima de los barbechos de Michael Holdsworth.

—Pues bien, fíjese en mis palabras. Esa nube se extenderá por el cielo del mismo modo que usted podría extender un encerado sobre las hacinas de heno. Es algo muy importante estudiar las nubes. A Dios gracias, los almanaques meteorológicos no pueden enseñarme nada; en cambio, si viniesen a consultarme, tal vez podría yo enseñarles algo a ellos. ¿Cómo está, señora Poyser? Espero que piense en coger muy pronto las grosellas. Mejor sería que las hiciese coger antes de que estén muy maduras, pues el tiempo no está seguro. ¿Cómo está, señora Bede? —continuó el señor Craig sin hacer una pausa y saludando al mismo tiempo con un movimiento de cabeza a Seth y a su hermano Adam—. Espero que le gustarían las espinacas y las uvas que le mandé por Chester. Si alguna vez necesita verduras, ya sabe dónde encontrarlas. Ya se sabe que no regalo las cosas que pertenezcan a otras personas, pues en cuanto aprovisiono bien la casa, todo lo que queda en el jardín me pertenece. Y estoy seguro de que el anciano caballero no podría encontrar a nadie que hiciese producir la tierra tanto como yo. Toda la vida me he esforzado en alcanzar buen nombre y puedo decir con orgullo que me reembolso sobradamente el dinero que todos los años pago al caballero. Me gustaría mucho que esos individuos que hacen los almanaques supiesen prever el tiempo como yo, ya que, gracias a eso, puedo ganarme la vida.

—Pues parece que aciertan bastante —dijo el señor Poyser volviendo un poco la cabeza y hablando con tono respetuoso—. Fíjese que se ha cumplido en todas sus partes aquel dibujo del gallo provisto de grandes espolones al que destrozaba la cabeza un áncora y que, además, estaba rodeado de buques de guerra. Ese dibujo fue hecho antes de Navidad y ha resultado ser cierto como la Biblia. Como ya sabe, el gallo representa a Francia y el áncora a Nelson. Y todo eso nos lo dijeron por anticipado.

—¡Bah! —exclamó el señor Craig—. No hay que ser muy ladino para adivinar que los ingleses acabarían pegando a los franceses. Me consta, por haberlo oído de labios autorizados, que los franceses se consideran corpulentos cuando miden un metro cincuenta de alto, y que viven principalmente de sopas. Conozco a un hombre cuyo padre estaba muy familiarizado con los franceses; y me gustaría saber qué pueden hacer esos saltamontes contra unos individuos tan estupendos como nuestro capitán Arthur. Créame que se asombraría de ver a un francés. Tienen los brazos casi tan gruesos como el cuerpo, lo cual se debe a que llevan corsé y pueden apretarse mucho porque dentro no tienen nada.

—Y por cierto, ¿dónde está el capitán, que hoy no ha venido a la iglesia? —preguntó Adam—. Hablé el viernes con él y no me dijo nada de que quisiera marcharse.

—¡Oh! Ha ido unos cuantos días a Eagledale a pescar; me figuro que estará de vuelta dentro de poco, pues debe preparar la celebración de su mayoría de edad el día 13 de julio. Pero le gusta ausentarse a veces porque él y el viejo caballero ligan tan poco entre sí como la escarcha y las flores.

El señor Craig sonrió y guiñó el ojo lentamente al hacer esta última observación, pero no siguió hablando del asunto porque habían llegado ya a la curva del camino donde Adam y sus compañeros debían despedirse. También el jardinero tenía que tomar la misma dirección, si no hubiese aceptado la invitación del señor Poyser para ir a su casa a tomar el té. La señora Poyser apoyó la invitación, pues habría considerado una deshonra no acoger amablemente en su casa a los vecinos; las simpatías o las antipatías personales no habían de ser tenidas en cuenta en aquella costumbre sagrada. Además, el señor Craig siempre se mostraba muy amable con la familia de Hall Farm, y la señora Poyser tenía gran empeño en declarar que «no podía decir nada malo contra él, aunque era una lástima que aquel hombre no pudiese nacer de nuevo para ser diferente». Así, Adam y Seth, con su madre entre ambos, descendieron por el sendero en dirección al valle y subieron la ladera opuesta hacia la vieja casa donde un triste recuerdo vino a ocupar el lugar de una larga ansiedad y donde Adam no preguntaría nunca más al entrar: «¿Dónde está padre?».

El otro grupo familiar, acompañado por el señor Craig, regresó a la agradable y risueña vivienda de Hall Farm, todos ellos con pensamientos apacibles a excepción de Hetty, que ya sabía adonde había ido Arthur, dato que contribuyó a aumentar su extrañeza y su inquietud. Parecía, en efecto, que su ausencia era completamente voluntaria; no tenía ninguna necesidad de marcharse y no lo habría hecho si hubiera

deseado verla de nuevo. La joven experimentaba la amarga sensación de que ya nada en la vida podía ser agradable para ella si no se cumplía la visión que había tenido el jueves por la noche; y en aquel momento de helado e invernal desencanto volvió a imaginarse la posibilidad de estar de nuevo con Arthur, de gozar de su amorosa mirada y de oír sus palabras suaves, con aquel vehemente deseo que llamamos el dolor creciente de la pasión.

XIX

ADAM EN UN DÍA DE TRABAJO

A pesar de la profecía del señor Craig, la nube oscura se dispersó sola sin originar las consecuencias con que parecía amenazar. «El tiempo —dijo el jardinero a la mañana siguiente—, el tiempo, según veis, es muy caprichoso, de modo que se dan casos de que un ignorante acierte cuando el sabio se equivoca; por esta razón logran acreditarse tanto los almanaques. Es una de las cosas que dependen de la casualidad y que proporcionan mucho éxito a los ignorantes».

Esta conducta poco razonable del tiempo no disgustó a nadie en Hayslope aparte del señor Craig. Todo el mundo salió a los prados aquella mañana en cuanto hubo caído el rocío. Las esposas y las hijas trabajaban el doble en todas las granjas para que las criadas pudiesen ayudar a recoger el heno, y cuando Adam marchaba a lo largo de los senderos cargado con el capazo de las herramientas oyó alegres conversaciones y grandes carcajadas más allá de los setos. Las chanzas y las risas de los que recogen el heno parecen mucho mejores a cierta distancia; como los rudos cencerros colgados de los cuellos de las vacas, adquieren un tono vulgar y ordinario cuando resuenan cerca, y hasta es posible que lleguen a molestar al oído; pero cuando se oyen a distancia se confunden de un modo muy agradable con otros alegres ruidos de la naturaleza. Los músculos humanos trabajan mejor cuando las almas están llenas de música, aunque esta alegría sea de peor calidad y nada parecida a la que sienten y exteriorizan los pájaros.

Y quizás no haya en los días de verano horas más alegres que cuando el calor del sol empieza a triunfar sobre el frío de la mañana, cuando todavía parece quedar un recuerdo ligero del frescor y se siente la languidez que produce la influencia deliciosa del calor. La razón de que Adam anduviera por los senderos a aquella hora era que durante el resto del día debía reparar, por encargo del hijo de un caballero vecino, una casa de campo situada a cinco kilómetros de distancia. Durante las primeras horas de la mañana había estado ocupado en disponer el traslado de los paneles y de las puertas, que se cargaron en un carro que partió precediéndole, mientras que Jonathan Burge se dirigió allí a caballo para esperar la llegada del carro y dirigir a los obreros.

Aquel pequeño paseo constituía un descanso para Adam, quien, sin darse cuenta, se hallaba bajo el encanto del momento. En su corazón reinaba la mañana veraniega; veía a Hetty alumbrada por la luz del sol, una luz que no deslumbraba y cuyos rayos temblaban entre las delicadas sombras de las hojas. El día anterior, cuando, al salir de la iglesia, había ofrecido la mano a la joven, creyó notar en su rostro una bondad melancólica que jamás había observado, y atribuyó esta expresión a su pena por el dolor de la familia. ¡Pobre muchacho! Aquella expresión melancólica era debida a otra causa muy distinta, pero ¿cómo podía saberlo? Miramos el rostro de la mujer a quien amamos como miramos el rostro de nuestra madre tierra, y vemos toda suerte de respuestas para nuestros anhelos. Era imposible que Adam no se dijera que lo sucedido la semana anterior facilitaba sus posibilidades de casarse. Hasta entonces había temido que otro hombre se le anticipase y se hiciese dueño del corazón y de la mano de Hetty mientras él estaba en una situación que le impedía solicitar a la joven. Y aun de haber abrigado verdaderas esperanzas de que ella le quisiera (y estas esperanzas estaban muy lejos de ser grandes), le agobiaban demasiados deberes para pensar siquiera en disponer para sí mismo y para Hetty un hogar que pudiera satisfacer a la joven después de la seguridad y de la abundancia de que gozaba en la granja. Como todas las naturalezas fuertes, Adam tenía confianza en sí mismo y estaba seguro de que llegaría a ser algo. Creía que, si vivía, podía llegar a mantener una familia y abrirse paso. Pero tenía una cabeza demasiado firme y fría para no dar un valor real a los obstáculos que debería vencer. Y el tiempo se le hacía eterno con Hetty ante sus ojos, a Hetty lozana y

atractiva, como una manzana que cuelga por encima de la tapia del jardín, a la vista de todo el mundo y deseada también de todos. Seguro que, si ella le amaba, no tendría inconveniente en esperarle. ¿Pero le amaba? Sus esperanzas nunca fueron tan grandes como para atreverse a preguntárselo. Sin embargo, se daba cuenta de que los tíos de la joven habrían acogido favorablemente su noviazgo, y, de no haber sido por esta circunstancia, nunca habría insistido en visitar la granja; pero era imposible llegar a una conclusión definitiva con respecto a los sentimientos de Hetty. Era como una gatita, y tenía el mismo aspecto atractivo y hermoso, que ignoraba a todos cuantos se aproximaban a ella.

Pero Adam no pudo dejar de decirse que había desaparecido la más pesada de sus cargas y que antes de terminar el año sus circunstancias podían cambiar de tal modo que ya le sería posible pensar en casarse. Desde luego tendría que entablar una dura lucha con su madre, quien tendría celos de cualquier esposa que escogiese, aparte de que Hetty le era especialmente antipática, aunque quizás no tuviera otra razón que la de sospechar que era la mujer elegida por su hijo. Adam se temía que, una vez casado, le sería imposible vivir en la misma casa que su madre, pero ¡qué doloroso sería para la pobre vieja el hecho de que su hijo le rogara que se fuera de su lado! Sí. Le esperaba un buen disgusto con su madre, pero en ese caso no tenía más remedio que dar a entender su propósito inquebrantable, pues al fin y al cabo sería mejor para la anciana. Él habría preferido vivir todos juntos hasta que se casara Seth, aunque hubiese sido necesario ampliar un poco la antigua casa. Tampoco le apetecía irse a vivir lejos de su hermano, pues desde que nacieron nunca habían estado separados más de un día.

Cuando Adam se sorprendió haciendo todos estos planes para un futuro tan incierto, se apresuró a contenerse. «Estoy construyendo una hermosa casa sin maderos ni ladrillos —se dijo—. Y ya he llegado a la buhardilla sin haber excavado los cimientos».

Siempre que Adam estaba convencido de cualquier proposición, ésta tomaba en su mente la forma de un principio: era un conocimiento sobre cuya base se podía actuar, del mismo modo que sobre el principio de que la humedad oxida el hierro. Tal vez residía allí el secreto de la dureza de carácter de que él mismo se acusaba: sentía poca compasión por la debilidad que persiste en el error pese a las consecuencias previstas. Y sin esa compasión, ¿cómo podremos mostrar bastante paciencia y caridad hacia nuestros compañeros que se tambalean y caen en el largo e irregular camino de la vida? Las almas fuertes y decididas sólo tienen un modo de hacerlo, que consiste en rodear con sus fuertes brazos a los débiles y a los equivocados, sufriendo así las consecuencias exteriores de sus errores y participando además de sus dolores íntimos. Esta es una lección larga y dura, y Adam sólo había aprendido el alfabeto con la repentina muerte de su padre, que, al suprimir en un instante todo lo que había estimulado su indignación, creó una corriente repentina de ideas y de recuerdos sobre la que se había surgido su compasión y su ternura.

Pero era su energía la que influía en las meditaciones de aquella mañana y no su dureza paralela. Hacía mucho tiempo que estaba convencido de que sería una equivocación y una tontería por su parte casarse con una muchacha tan joven mientras no tuviera razones para esperar que sus ingresos irían en aumento a medida que fuese creciendo su familia. Además, sus ahorros siempre estaban asediados por multitud de causas (aparte del terrible bajón que experimentaron al pagar el sustituto de Seth), así que no contaba con lo suficiente para amueblar una casita, por humilde que fuese, y reservar algo para un día desfavorable. Tenía esperanzas de que no tardaría en estar mejor situado, pero esa vaga confianza en sus brazos y en su cerebro no le satisfacía. Debía tener planes concretos y empezar a ejecutarlos cuanto antes. Por el momento no se podía pensar siquiera en su asociación con Jonathan Burge, pues ésta comprendía implícitamente otras cosas que no podía aceptar; en cambio Adam pensaba emprender con Seth un modesto negocio por su propia cuenta, que combinarían con su trabajo como obreros. Comprarían madera de excelente calidad para construir algunos pequeños muebles, pues Adam destacaba en esas tareas. Seth podría ganar más realizando trabajos independientes a las órdenes de Adam que en su trabajo como obrero, y Adam podría dedicarse a las tareas delicadas que requerían especial habilidad en horas extraordinarias. El dinero que ganase de ese modo, unido a los buenos jornales que recibía como encargado, no tardarían en permitirle alcanzar una situación económica mejor, teniendo en cuenta que en adelante podrían ahorrar más. Y en cuanto se hubo concretado en su mente este pequeño plan, empezó a calcular con exactitud la madera que habían de comprar y los pequeños muebles que empezarían a construir. Tenía en mente, por ejemplo, un armarito de cocina ideado por él y provisto de ingeniosos dispositivos, de puertas correderas y de cierres, y, sin embargo, de aspecto tan simétrico y agradable, que toda buena ama de casa se entusiasmaría al verlo o se entregaría a la melancolía hasta que su marido se decidiese a comprarlo. Adam se imaginó a la señora Poyser examinando el mueble con atención y buscándole en vano algún defecto; y, por supuesto, al lado de la señora Poyser estaría Hetty. Esta última idea apartó al joven de sus cálculos y de sus proyectos para sumirse en ensueños y esperanzas. Sí, iría esa misma noche a verla, pues hacía mucho tiempo que no había

estado en Hall Farm. Le habría gustado pasar por la escuela nocturna para averiguar por qué Barde Massey no había asistido al entierro el día anterior, y temía que su viejo amigo estuviera enfermo; pero como no era posible hacer las dos visitas en la misma noche, dejaría la segunda para el día siguiente, pues era demasiado fuerte el deseo de estar cerca de Hetty y de hablarle una vez más.

Mientras tomaba esta decisión advirtió que estaba muy cerca del final de su paseo, pues ya resonaban en sus oídos los martillazos de los trabajadores reparando la antigua casa. Para un hombre inteligente que disfruta con su trabajo, el ruido de las herramientas se parece a las notas que ensaya la orquesta y que escucha el violinista que ha de tomar parte en la obertura; las fuertes fibras comienzan su acostumbrada vibración, y lo que un momento antes era alegría, vejación o ambición, empieza a convertirse en energía. Toda pasión se convierte en fuerza cuando tiene una salida de los estrechos límites de nuestro destino personal en el trabajo que realiza la mano derecha o en la inmóvil actividad creadora de nuestro pensamiento. Si el lector hubiese podido ver a Adam durante el resto del día en el andamiaje —con la regla en la mano, silbando para sí mientras resolvía alguna dificultad acerca de alguna vigueta del entarimado o del marco de la ventana—; o cuando obligaba a apartarse a uno de los jóvenes trabajadores, ocupando su lugar para levantar una gruesa viga, diciendo «¡Suelta, muchacho; aún no tienes los huesos bastante duros para eso!»; o bien cuando fijaba sus penetrantes ojos negros en los movimientos de un obrero que se hallaba en el lado opuesto de la estancia y le indicaba que sus medidas no eran correctas, le habría parecido agradable contemplar a aquel hombre de anchos hombros, con los fornidos antebrazos desnudos y la cabeza cubierta de espeso cabello negro, según podía verse cada vez que se quitaba su gorro de papel, y mientras con fuerte voz de barítono entonaba algunos salmos, como si su fuerza sobrante buscase salida, aunque a veces se contenía, al parecer disgustado por alguna idea que no armonizaba con el canto. Tal vez si el lector no estuviera ya en el secreto, no habría adivinado cuántos amargos recuerdos, qué cálidos afectos y cuántas tiernas esperanzas se albergaban en aquel cuerpo atlético, en aquel hombre rudo que no conocía más música que la que podía oír en la iglesia; que conocía muy poco de la historia profana y para quien el movimiento y la forma de la tierra, el curso del sol y los cambios de las estaciones se hallaban en la región de los misterios que apenas había logrado divisar gracias a un conocimiento fragmentario. Le había costado una gran suma de esfuerzos y de horas de trabajo extraordinarias saber lo que sabía acerca de su oficio, de la mecánica y de los números, así como de la naturaleza de los materiales con que trabajaba, cosa que le resultaba fácil de una manera innata. Pero, además, aprendió a manejar la pluma, a escribir bien y a hablar sin más equivocaciones que las que se podían atribuir a los caprichos de la ortografía y no a su propia deficiencia, y también aprendió las notas musicales y un poco de solfeo. Independientemente de esto, había leído la Biblia e incluso los libros apócrifos; el *Almanaque del pobre Ricardo, Vida y muerte santa*, de Taylor; *Los progresos de los peregrinos* y *La vida de Bunyan*, así como *La guerra santa*, una gran parte del Diccionario de Bailey, *Valentine y Orson*, y una parte de la *Historia de Babilonia* que Barde Massey le había prestado. Desde luego éste le podría haber dejado otros libros, pero Adam no tenía tiempo para leer, pues en los ratos libres, y suponiendo que no se dedicase a la carpintería, debía realizar numerosos cálculos.

Ya se advierte que Adam no era un hombre maravilloso ni tampoco, hablando claro, un genio, sin embargo no pretendo que sea considerado un tipo corriente entre los obreros. Cuando veamos a un carpintero con el cesto de las herramientas sobre el hombro y la cabeza cubierta por un gorro de papel, no debemos creer que también él tiene la fuerza de voluntad y el sentido común de nuestro amigo Adam. Este no era un hombre vulgar, pero en cualquier generación de artesanos suelen existir algunos individuos como él, provistos de afectos que crecen al calor de una vida familiar sencilla y normal, y que, a las facultades heredadas, añaden otras nuevas gracias a un trabajo hábil y valeroso. Estos individuos prosperan generalmente como hombres laboriosos que poseen la habilidad y la conciencia necesarias para ejecutar honradamente sus trabajos. Sus vidas apenas son conocidas más allá de la vecindad en que se hallan; pero es casi seguro encontrar algún excelente tramo de camino, un edificio, determinadas aplicaciones de los productos minerales, algunas mejoras en la explotación de las granjas, reformas en los abusos parroquiales con que se asocian los nombres de esos individuos, y no sólo durante su vida, sino por espacio de otras dos generaciones. Los patronos de esos hombres ganaron más dinero gracias a ellos; el trabajo de sus manos fue excelente y el de su cerebro guió muy bien las manos de otros hombres. En su juventud empezaron a trabajar llevando gorras de franela o de papel, las chaquetas negras a causa del polvo del carbón o sucias de cal o de pintura roja; en su ancianidad sus blancos cabellos ocupan el lugar de honor, tanto en la iglesia como en el mercado, y, frente al hogar en las noches de invierno, rodeados por sus hijos y por sus nietos, recuerdan la alegría que sintieron el día en que ganaron el primer jornal de dos peniques. Otros mueren pobres y no llegan a abandonar la chaqueta de obrero. No han aprendido el arte de hacerse ricos, pero son hombres dignos de confianza, y cuando mueren antes de haber acabado su trabajo, ocurre como si se

soltara uno de los tornillos principales de una máquina; entonces el patrono que los empleaba se pregunta apenado: «¿Dónde encontraré a otro hombre semejante?».

XX

Adam visita Hall Farm

Adam regresó en el carro vacío y por esta razón pudo cambiarse de traje y estar listo para salir en dirección de Hall Farm cuando aún faltaba un cuarto de hora para las siete de la tarde.

—¿Para qué te has puesto el traje de los domingos? —preguntó Lisbeth en tono quejumbroso, mientras bajaba la escalera—. Supongo que no te pondrás este traje para ir a la escuela.

—No, madre —replicó Adam con tono apacible—. Voy a Hall Farm, pero puede que luego vaya también a la escuela, así que no te extrañes si vuelvo tarde. Seth volverá dentro de media hora; ha ido al pueblo, así que no estarás mucho rato sola.

—¿Y por qué te pones el traje bueno para ir a Hall Farm? Los Poyser te vieron anteayer. ¿Por qué te vistes como si fuera domingo? No merecen ser tus amigos los que no quieran verte con tu chaqueta de trabajo.

—Adiós, madre. No puedo entretenerme —dijo Adam poniéndose el sombrero y emprendiendo la marcha.

Pero no había dado muchos pasos cuando Lisbeth se inquietó al pensar que quizás había molestado a su hijo. Estaba claro que su oposición a que Adam vistiera el traje de los domingos era debida a su sospecha de que se vestía así por Hetty; pero a pesar de su acritud, necesitaba saber que su hijo continuaba queriéndola. Echó pues a correr tras él, le alcanzó antes de que llegara al arroyo y le dijo:

—No, hijo mío. No quiero que te marches enfadado con tu madre, que no tiene nada que hacer sino pensar en ti.

—No te apures, madre —contestó Adam rodeando con un brazo los hombros de la anciana—. No estoy enojado. Pero por tu propio bien, me gustaría que me dejases realizar mis propósitos. Mientras vivamos, yo seré siempre un buen hijo para ti, pero recuerda que el hombre tiene otros sentimientos aparte de los que debe a su padre y a su madre, y tú no debes pretender gobernarme en cuerpo y alma; ten en cuenta también que no te dejaré intervenir en todos aquellos asuntos que deba resolver por mí mismo. Así que vale más que no vuelvas a hablar de eso.

—¡Caramba! —dijo Lisbeth fingiendo que no comprendía el verdadero significado de las palabras de su hijo—. ¿Y quién sino tu madre desearía verte con tu traje de fiesta? Cuando te lavas la cara y te peinas, ¿quién sino tu madre se alegraría de verte tan guapo? Pero tú no te vistes de fiesta por mí… Pero, en fin, no volveré a molestarte acerca del particular.

—Está bien. Adiós, madre —contestó Adam. Y, después de besarla, se alejó apresuradamente.

Comprendió que no había otro modo de terminar aquel diálogo. Lisbeth se quedó en el mismo sitio, haciendo visera con la palma de la mano y mirando al joven hasta que éste se hubo perdido de vista. La anciana comprendió el significado de las palabras de su hijo, y en cuanto éste hubo desaparecido y ella volvió a meterse en la casa, se dijo en voz alta, como tenía por costumbre cuando estaba sola en la vivienda: «Uno de estos días me informará de que va a traer a su esposa, que será la verdadera dueña de la casa. Yo tendré que resignarme a ver cómo usa los platos de borde azul; quizás romperá alguno, cosa que ni a mí ni a mi marido nos ocurrió nunca, desde que, hace veinte años, los compramos para Pascua. En fin —añadió tomando su labor de calceta—, mi nuera no hará las medias de mis hijos mientras yo viva, y en cuanto me haya muerto, éstos se convencerán de que nadie es capaz de hacerles las medias tan bien como yo. Mi nuera no sabrá estrechar la pierna y tal vez hará un pie larguísimo, que no podrán calzar. Eso es lo que ocurre casándose con las mozas de hoy en día, que no tienen experiencia alguna. Mi marido y yo nos

casamos después de cumplir los treinta años, y éramos muy jóvenes. En cambio, cuando mi nuera cumpla esa edad, ya se habrá convertido en una vieja».

Adam andaba tan deprisa que llegó a la puerta de Hall Farm antes de las siete. Martin Poyser y el abuelo no habían vuelto todavía del parque, donde al parecer estaba todo el mundo, incluso el *terrier* negro y pardo. Por esa razón no había nadie para vigilar en el patio, a excepción del *bull-dog*, de manera que cuando Adam llegó a la puerta de la casa la halló abierta de par en par y no encontró a nadie dentro. Sin embargo, supuso que la señora Poyser y quizás alguna otra persona se hallarían a poca distancia. Por esta razón llamó a la puerta y preguntó:

—¿Está dentro la señora Poyser?

—Adelante, señor Bede, adelante —dijo la señora Poyser desde la lechería. Siempre llamaba así al joven cuando le recibía en su casa—. Si no le importa, venga a la lechería, pues en este momento me es imposible abandonar los quesos.

Así lo hizo Adam; la señora Poyser y Nancy estaban prensando el primer queso.

—Tal vez haya creído que llegaba a una casa muerta —dijo la señora Poyser cuando le vio aparecer en el umbral—. Todos están en el parque, pero Martin no tardará en llegar, pues han dejado preparado el heno a fin de traerlo por la mañana temprano. Y yo me he visto obligada a pedir ayuda a Nancy, pues Hetty está ocupada en coger las grosellas. Ese fruto a veces está tan maduro que es preciso recogerlo con gran cuidado. Y no puede una fiarse de los niños, pues se comen más de lo que echan al cesto. Como si fuesen avispas las encargadas de hacer la recolección.

Adam habría deseado decir que iría al jardín hasta que llegase el señor Poyser, pero no tuvo valor y replicó:

—Pues en tal caso examinaré su torno de hilar, para ver si puede arreglarse. ¿Cree que podré encontrarlo en la casa?

—No, ya que lo mandé guardar en la sala de la derecha. Espérese a que yo pueda acompañarlo. Ahora le agradecería que fuese al jardín a decir a Hetty que me envíe a Totty. La niña vendrá sola si se lo mandan; además estoy segura de que Hetty le dejará comer demasiadas grosellas. Le agradeceré mucho, señor Bede, que haga venir a la niña. En el jardín hay muchas rosas de York y de Lancaster que le encantará contemplar. Aunque primero quizás quiera beber un poco de suero. Sé que le gusta mucho, como les ocurre a muchas personas.

—Muchas gracias, señora Poyser —dijo Adam—. Nunca me niego a probar un vaso de suero cuando me lo ofrecen, y casi me gusta más que la cerveza.

—Sí —la señora Poyser tomó un jarrito blanco que estaba en un estante y lo sumergió en el recipiente de suero—, a todo el mundo le gusta el pan menos al panadero. Las señoritas Irwine me dicen siempre: «¡Oh, señora Poyser, le envidiamos la lechería, y también los pollos! Ciertamente una granja es algo muy agradable». Y yo les contesto: «Sí. Es muy bonito visitar una granja; pero el que ha de trabajar en ella ya no la encuentra tan agradable».

—Estoy seguro, señora Poyser, de que no le gustaría vivir en otra parte, porque dirige muy bien los trabajos de la hacienda —dijo Adam tomando el jarro—. Por otra parte, creo que son espectáculos muy agradables una buena vaca lechera en el prado y con la hierba hasta las rodillas, la leche recién ordeñada que espumea en el cubo y la manteca fresca dispuesta para vender en el mercado, y también son preciosos los terneros y las gallinas. A su salud y que siempre pueda vigilar su lechería, que es un modelo que deberían copiar las esposas de todos los granjeros de la comarca.

La señora Poyser no tenía la debilidad de sonreír al recibir un cumplido, sin embargo en esta ocasión se le iluminó el rostro con gran satisfacción y dirigió una mirada más amable que de costumbre a los ojos del joven, quien, en aquel momento, se bebía el suero. ¡Ah! Me parece que saboreo aquel suero, con un aroma tan delicado y una tibieza que llenaba la imaginación de agradable somnolencia. Aún resuena en mis oídos la suave música del suero al caer confundido con el gorjeo de un pájaro que se hallaba al otro lado de la ventana cubierta con enrejado de alambre, aquella ventana que miraba al jardín y a la que daba sombra un rosal.

—¿Quiere un poco más, señor Bede? —preguntó la señora Poyser cuando el joven dejaba el jarrito.

—No, muchas gracias. Ahora iré al jardín y le mandaré a la niña.

—Sí. Hágalo, y dígale que venga junto a su madre a la lechería.

Adam dio una vuelta en torno a la era, a la sazón vacía, y se acercó a la puertecilla de madera que daba al jardín, el cual, en otro tiempo, había sido el bien cuidado huerto de la casa señorial. En aquella época del año, en que la naturaleza había adquirido gran frondosidad, buscar a alguien en aquel jardín huerto equivalía casi a jugar al escondite. Las altas malvas hortenses empezaban a florecer y atraían las miradas

con sus colores rojo, blanco y amarillo. Había lilas y rosas, todas ellas enormes y medio tronchadas por falta de cuidados; gruesas líneas de judías rojas y de guisantes; más allá había una fila de avellanos frondosos y un manzano cuyas extendidas ramas impedían que creciese planta alguna debajo. ¿Pero qué importaba que algún lugar permaneciese estéril? El jardín era enorme. Siempre sobraban las habichuelas rojas, y Adam tuvo que dar nueve o diez pasos para llegar al extremo del sendero que corría a lo largo de las matas. Y en cuanto a las demás hortalizas, tenían más espacio del que necesitaban, y en la rotación de las cosechas siempre se presentaba en uno y otro lugar una faja de hierba cana. Los mismos rosales ante los que se detuvo Adam para tomar una flor, llegaban a parecer silvestres. Formaban verdaderos matorrales y casi todos los pétalos eran de color rojo y blanco, debido quizás a la unión de las variedades de York y de Lancaster. Adam eligió una gran rosa de Provenza que asomaba sus pétalos por entre sus compañeras desprovistas de aroma (pensó que todo le sería más fácil si llevaba algo en la mano) y se dirigió al lejano extremo del jardín, donde, según recordaba, había una larga fila de groselleros no lejos del gran tejo. Pero apenas se había alejado de las rosas, cuando oyó el ruido de un arbusto al ser sacudido y una voz de niño que decía:

—¡Ahora, Totty, tiende el delantal, que aquí va una muy gorda!

La voz procedía de entre las ramas de un alto cerezo, y Adam pudo distinguir al pequeño Tommy cómodamente sentado donde los frutos eran más abundantes. Sin duda, Totty estaba debajo y detrás de las matas de guisantes. Sí, pudo verla con el gorrito colgando hacia detrás y su rostro rollizo espantosamente manchado de rojo y levantado hacia el árbol, mientras mantenía la boca abierta y el sucio delantal tendido para recibir la prometida fruta. Siento decir que más de la mitad de las cerezas que caían eran duras y amarillas en vez de jugosas y rojas; pero Totty no perdía el tiempo en inútiles lamentos y chupaba lo mejor de las cerezas que llegaban a sus manos. Adam dijo:

—Ahora, Totty, ya te han dado cerezas. Llévaselas corriendo a tu madre. Está en la lechería y te necesita. Ve enseguida…, como las niñas buenas.

La levantó con sus fuertes brazos y la besó; Totty pensó que toda esta ceremonia era una fastidiosa interrupción de la tarea que la ocupaba y cuando la dejó en el suelo echó a correr en silencio hacia la casa, pero sin dejar de comer cerezas.

—Oye, Tommy, ten cuidado de que no te confundan con un pájaro ladrón y te peguen un tiro —dijo Adam mientras se dirigía hacia los groselleros.

En el extremo de la fila había un gran cesto. Hetty no debía de estar muy lejos, y Adam experimentó la sensación de que ya le estaba mirando. Después de dar la vuelta al sendero, la vio de pie, volviéndole la espalda e inclinándose para recoger los frutos que crecían en las ramas bajas. Era muy raro que no le hubiese oído llegar. Tal vez fuera por el ruido que hacía ella misma al mover las ramas de los arbustos. La joven se sobresaltó al notar su presencia, y la sorpresa fue tan violenta que dejó caer el cestito lleno de grosellas; luego, al ver que era Adam, desapareció su palidez para sonrojarse intensamente. Este sonrojo hizo latir el corazón del joven con una nueva felicidad, pues hasta entonces Hetty nunca se había ruborizado en su presencia.

—¿La he asustado? —dijo con la sensación deliciosa de que esas palabras no significaban lo que en realidad quería decirle, puesto que Hetty parecía estar tan conmovida como él mismo—. Permítame que recoja las grosellas.

En cuanto acabó de recogerlas unos instantes después, Adam se puso en pie, le devolvió el cesto y la miró fijamente con la contenida ternura propia de los primeros momentos de amor esperanzado. Hetty no desvió la mirada. Su sonrojo había desaparecido y mantuvo la mirada del joven con una apacible tristeza que gustó a Adam, pues era muy distinta de cuanto hasta entonces había visto en la joven.

—Ya quedan muy pocas grosellas —dijo la joven—; así que en breve estaré lista.

—Yo la ayudaré —contestó Adam yendo en busca del gran cesto, que estaba casi lleno, para llevarlo junto a la joven.

Mientras cogían las grosellas no cruzaron ninguna palabra. El corazón de Adam estaba demasiado emocionado y pensó que Hetty comprendía muy bien sus sentimientos. Había notado que la joven no era del todo insensible a su presencia: primero se había sonrojado al verle y luego había observado en su rostro aquella leve tristeza que, sin duda, era indicadora de amor, puesto que en nada se parecía a su aspecto habitual, casi siempre indiferente. Adam no podía dejar de mirarla mientras se inclinaba sobre las frutas y los rayos del sol atravesaban las espesas hojas del manzano e iban a iluminar sus redondas mejillas y su cuello, como si a su vez estuviesen enamorados de ella. No olvidaría esos momentos en toda su vida. Pensó que la primera mujer a quien amaba le demostraba alguna emoción, y que, por medio de una palabra, de un tono de voz, de una mirada o por el temblor de los labios o de los párpados, daba muestras de que, a su

vez, estaba dispuesta a corresponder a su pasión. Pero aquellas señales eran tan ligeras, tan poco perceptibles para los ojos o para el oído, que él no habría podido describir una sola, pues no eran más que algo equivalente al roce de una pluma; sin embargo, bastaron para cambiar todo su ser y para hacer desaparecer sus inquietudes, que fueron sustituidas por una deliciosa inconsciencia de todo lo que no fuese ese momento. Generalmente, las primeras alegrías desaparecen de nuestra memoria. Nunca recordamos la felicidad con que reclinamos la cabeza en el regazo de nuestra madre o cabalgamos sobre la espalda de nuestro padre en los días de nuestra infancia; sin duda esas alegrías contribuyen a formar nuestro ser, del mismo modo que un rayo de sol contribuyó en otros días a dar su suavidad al albaricoque; sin embargo, desaparecen de nuestra mente: creemos en las alegrías de la infancia, mas no las recordamos. Pero el primer momento alegre de nuestro primer amor es una visión que podemos contemplar hasta el fin de nuestras vidas, y nos proporciona una emoción tan intensa y especial como el recuerdo de los dulces aromas aspirados en una hora lejana de felicidad. Es un recuerdo que deja una impresión de exquisita ternura, pero que alimenta la locura de los celos y hace durar los tormentos y la agonía de la desesperación.

Adam recordaría hasta el último momento de su vida a Hetty inclinada sobre las ramas del grosellero e iluminada por los rayos de sol que atravesaban el manzano. Mientras la contemplaba, Adam creía que Hetty pensaba en él y que, por consiguiente, ninguno de los dos tenía necesidad de hablar.

¿Y Hetty? Ya sabe el lector qué equivocado estaba Adam con respecto a ella. Como muchos otros hombres, creyó que los síntomas del amor por otro eran indicios de amor hacia su propia persona. Cuando Adam se había acercado a ella sin ser visto, la joven pensaba, como de costumbre, en el posible regreso de Arthur: el ruido de pasos de cualquier hombre le habría producido la misma impresión de que podía ser Arthur antes de convencerse por sí misma de lo contrario, y la sangre que había teñido sus mejillas en la agitación de aquel momento se habría retirado al ver al recién llegado, cualquiera que fuese éste a excepción de Arthur. Adam no se engañaba al decirse que Hetty había experimentado un cambio; las ansiedades y temores del primer amor, que la hacían temblar, habían dominado en ella la vanidad, y le hicieron comprender por primera vez que dependía por completo de los sentimientos de otro, lo cual despierta la pasión femenina aún en la joven más insensible y crea en ella la facultad, si antes no la tenía, de percibir la bondad. Por vez primera Hetty comprendió que la viril y tímida ternura de Adam le ofrecía algún consuelo. ¡Oh! Era muy duro soportar aquella ausencia, aquella indiferencia aparente después de unos momentos de resplandeciente amor. No temía que Adam la molestara haciéndole la corte o dirigiéndole lisonjas como otros admiradores; siempre había sido muy reservado con ella, de modo que podía disfrutar sin miedo de la sensación de que aquel hombre fuerte y valeroso la amaba y se hallaba a su lado. Jamas se le ocurrió siquiera que Adam fuese digno de compasión y que, a su vez, llegaría a sufrir mucho.

Ya sabemos que Hetty no era la primera mujer que se portaba amablemente con el hombre que la amaba en vano, ya que a su vez había empezado a querer a otro. Era una historia antigua, pero como Adam la desconocía, se deleitó con aquella dulce y engañosa ilusión.

—Ya está —dijo Hetty después de unos momentos—. Mí tía quiere que deje algunas grosellas en los árboles. Voy a llevarlas a casa.

—Yo llevaré el cesto —dijo Adam—, pues sería muy pesado para sus bracitos.

—No. Puedo llevarlo con las dos manos.

—Tal vez —replicó Adam sonriendo—. Pero tardaría tanto en llegar a la casa como una hormiga que arrastra una oruga. ¿Se ha fijado en esos insectos que a veces arrastran cosas cuatro veces mayores que ellos?

—No —dijo Hetty indiferente a las dificultades con que han de luchar las hormigas.

—Pues cuando yo era niño solía fijarme en ellas. Ahora ya ve que puedo llevar el cesto con una mano como si fuese una cáscara de nuez vacía y ofrecerle la otra para que se apoye en ella. ¿Quiere? Los brazos enormes como los míos se hicieron para que en ellos se apoyen los más delicados como los suyos.

Hetty sonrió levemente y apoyó su brazo en el del joven. Adam la miró, pero ella había vuelto sus ojos soñolientos hacia otro lado del jardín.

—¿Ha estado en Eagledale? —preguntó mientras avanzaban despacio.

—Sí —contestó Adam satisfecho de que ella le hiciese una pregunta sobre sí mismo—. Hace diez años, cuando era un muchacho. Fui con mi padre para examinar un trabajo. Es un sitio maravilloso y hay unas rocas y unas cuevas como no las había visto en toda mi vida. Por mi parte, nunca supe lo que eran rocas hasta que estuve allí.

—¿Y cuánto tardó en hacer el viaje?

—Empleamos dos jornadas, aunque con un buen caballo recorrería el mismo trayecto en un día. El

capitán podría llegar allí en nueve o diez horas, pues es un jinete magnífico. No me extrañaría que volviese mañana, ya que es tan activo que no puede estarse quieto en un sitio tan solitario como aquél. Allí se encontrará solo, pues no hay nada más que una mala posada en el lugar adonde ha ido a pescar. Me gustaría mucho que la propiedad estuviese ya en sus manos; a él le convendría, así tendría mucho que hacer, y lo haría bien a pesar de su juventud. Sus ideas sobre las cosas son mucho más acertadas que las de los hombres que le doblan la edad. El otro día me habló muy amablemente acerca de la posibilidad de prestarme el dinero necesario para emprender negocios; y si las cosas marchan bien, preferiría debérselo todo a él que a cualquier otro hombre del mundo.

El pobre Adam hablaba de Arthur creyendo que a Hetty le gustaría saber que el joven caballero estaba dispuesto a protegerle. Era una de sus esperanzas, que deseaba lo fuese también para la joven. Lo cierto es que ésta le escuchaba con un nuevo resplandor en la mirada y una leve sonrisa en los labios.

—¡Qué hermosas están ahora las rosas! —continuó Adam deteniéndose para contemplarlas—. Mire, he robado la más bonita, pero no para quedármela. Creo que éstas de color rojo tienen las hojas verdes más bonitas que las otras manchadas. ¿No le parece?

Dejó el cesto en el suelo y se quitó la rosa del ojal.

—Huele muy bien —añadió—. Las otras manchadas de rojo carecen de aroma. Póngasela en su traje y luego métala en un jarro con un poco de agua. Sería una lástima dejar que se marchitase.

Hetty tomó la rosa sonriendo al mismo tiempo, pues de repente se le ocurrió que si Arthur lo deseaba podría volver muy pronto. En su mente hubo un rayo de esperanza y de felicidad y, con un impulso repentino y alegre, hizo lo mismo que en otras ocasiones, o sea introducir el tallo de la rosa en su cabello un poco por encima de la oreja izquierda. La tierna admiración que reflejaba el rostro de Adam retrocedió ligeramente ante un sentimiento de desaprobación. La afición de Hetty por el lujo suscitaría sin duda la irritación de su madre, y a él mismo tampoco le parecía bien en la medida en que algo que procediera de Hetty pudiera suscitar su disgusto.

—¡Ah! —dijo el joven—. Ahora se parece a las damas de los cuadros que hay en el cazadero. Muchas llevan flores, plumas o adornos de oro en el cabello, pero a mí eso no me gusta. Siempre me recuerdan a las mujeres pintadas en las barracas de la feria de Treddleston. ¿Qué mejor adorno puede tener una mujer que su propio cabello, cuando es rizado como el suyo? Cuando una mujer es joven y hermosa, mejor se advierten sus encantos cuanto más sencillo es su tocado. Por ejemplo, Dinah Morris es muy guapa a pesar del traje y el gorro tan sencillos que lleva. También creo que el rostro de una mujer no necesita flores, pues ya es una flor por sí mismo. Al menos lo es el suyo.

—Muy bien —contestó Hetty con alegre enfurruñamiento y quitándose la rosa del cabello—. En cuanto estemos en casa me pondré uno de los gorros de Dinah y así verá si me sienta bien. Al marcharse dejó uno de los que llevaba y así haremos la prueba.

—No, no. No es que deba llevar un gorro metodista como el de Dinah. No tengo inconveniente en afirmar que es muy feo y lo mismo pensé al verla por primera vez en su casa, porque resulta una tontería vestirse de un modo distinto de los demás; aunque si he de decir la verdad, nunca me había fijado bien en ella antes de que fuese a ver a mi madre la semana pasada. Entonces me pareció que aquel gorro le sentaba muy bien y que quizás no estaría tan guapa sin él. Usted, en cambio, tiene un rostro muy distinto. Está mejor como ahora, sin que nada modifique su aspecto. Es como cuando un hombre canta una buena canción: no nos gusta que suenen las campanas e interrumpan su canto.

Le tomó el brazo y lo enlazó otra vez con el suyo mirándola al mismo tiempo muy cariñoso. Temía que la joven pensara que había querido darle una lección, imaginándose, como suele sucedemos, que Hetty podía haber adivinado los pensamientos que él sólo había expresado a medias. Y si algo temía era que aquella tarde pudiera interponerse alguna nube en su felicidad. Ni por todo el oro del mundo habría hablado todavía a Hetty de su amor; esperaba que aquella bondad hacia él por parte de la joven se convirtiese a su vez en amor. Se decía que habrían de transcurrir muchos años de su vida bendecidos con la posesión de Hetty y que, por lo tanto, de momento podía contentarse con muy poco. Así que volvió a tomar el cesto de grosellas y continuaron el camino hacia la casa.

Durante la media hora que Adam pasó en el jardín, había cambiado la escena por completo. La era estaba llena de vida: Marty guiaba a los chillones patos a través del portón y provocaba al ganso silbándole. La puerta del granero gemía sobre sus goznes cuando la cerraba Alick tras sacar el grano necesario; los caballos eran conducidos al abrevadero entre los ladridos de los tres perros y las voces de Tim, el labrador, como si los pesados animales que inclinaban sus inteligentes cabezas y andaban con paso tan decidido fuesen a tomar imprudentemente otra dirección que la derecha. Todo el mundo había regresado del parque, y cuando Hetty y Adam entraron en la casa, la señora Poyser estaba «sentada en un sillón y el abuelo en

otro que había en el lado opuesto», contemplando con satisfacción los preparativos de la cena. La misma señora Poyser tendió el mantel, mantel tejido con hilo de fabricación casera de color marrón y con un dibujo a cuadros, muy apreciado por las buenas amas de casa, y muy diferente de esos tejidos que se compran en las tiendas y que se agujerean enseguida; éste al menos duraría un par de generaciones. La carne de ternera fría, la lechuga fresca y el lomo relleno eran enormemente tentadores para las personas que no habían probado bocado desde las doce y media. En la larga mesa, que estaba arrimada a la pared, se veían unos brillantes platos de peltre, cucharas y jarros dispuestos para Alick y sus compañeros; pues el amo y los criados no cenaban muy lejos unos de otros, lo cual resultaba muy agradable. Porque si al señor Poyser se le ocurría hacer alguna observación referente al trabajo del día siguiente, Alick estaba al lado para oírle.

—¡Hola, Adam! Me alegro mucho de verle —dijo el señor Poyser—. De modo que ha ayudado a Hetty a coger las grosellas. Venga, venga a sentarse. Por lo menos hace tres semanas que no cena con nosotros. Hoy, por suerte, el ama ha preparado un lomo relleno. Me alegro mucho de que haya venido.

—Mira, Hetty —dijo la señora Poyser después de examinar el cesto de grosellas—, ve arriba y mándame a Molly. Está acostando a Totty y quiero que vaya en busca de cerveza, porque Nancy está ocupada en la lechería. Cuida de la niña. Pero dime, ¿por qué la has dejado ir con Tommy, con quien se ha hartado de fruta hasta el punto de que no ha tenido ganas de cenar?

Dijo esto en un tono más bajo que de costumbre mientras su marido hablaba con Adam, pues la señora Poyser observaba muy bien las conveniencias sociales y creía que no hay que regañar a una muchacha en presencia del hombre que la corteja. Eso no sería correcto. A cada mujer le corresponde ser joven en su momento y tiene sus propias oportunidades para casarse, de modo que las demás mujeres no deben privarla de esas ventajas, así como la vendedora del mercado que ya ha vendido todos sus huevos no debe quitar un cliente a su vecina.

Hetty se apresuró a subir la escalera al no hallar fácil respuesta a la pregunta de su tía, quien se dirigió hacia Marty y Tommy para servirles la cena.

Pronto estuvieron todos sentados. Los dos muchachos de rojas mejillas se sentaron uno al lado del otro junto a su madre. Entre Adam y su tío quedó un lugar desocupado para Hetty. Alick, que había llegado también, se sentó en su rincón más alejado y empezó a comer unas habas frías que se llevaba a la boca con la punta del cuchillo. Y debemos advertir que encontraba en ellas un sabor y un aroma tal que no las habría cambiado por ningún otro manjar.

—¡Pues no tarda poco esa muchacha en traer la cerveza! —observó la señora Poyser mientras servía unas lonchas del célebre lomo relleno—. No me extrañaría que pusiera el jarro debajo del grifo y se olvidase de cerrarlo, ya que de esas muchachas se puede esperar cualquier cosa. A veces ponen un jarro vacío en el fuego y al cabo de una hora van a ver si hierve el agua.

—Ten en cuenta que también saca cerveza para los hombres —dijo el señor Poyser—. Deberías haberle advertido que subiese primero nuestro jarro.

—Puedes creerme si te digo que me quedaría sin aliento si tuviese que advertir a esas muchachas todo lo que no deben hacer. No tienen cabeza para nada. Señor Bede, ¿quiere un poco de vinagre para la lechuga? Hace bien en no aceptarlo, porque estropea el aroma del lomo. Es una lástima que el sabor de la carne quede borrado por el vinagre. Es como esos individuos que hacen una mala manteca y la cargan de sal para ocultar el defecto.

La atención del señor Poyser fue solicitada por la aparición de Molly, que llevaba un enorme jarro, otros dos más pequeños y cuatro de menor capacidad, estos últimos para beber directamente de ellos, y todos llenos de cerveza suave; constituía un ejemplo interesante de la fuerza compresora de las manos humanas. Mientras andaba con los ojos fijos en la doble fila de recipientes en sus manos, la boca de la pobre Molly estaba más abierta que de costumbre y no advertía la expresión de los ojos de su ama.

—Nunca he visto a una muchacha como tú, Molly. Y pensar que tu pobre madre es viuda, que te tomé a mi servicio cuando no sabías hacer nada, y que continúas lo mismo a pesar de mis advertencias…

Molly no había visto el rayo, y el trueno sacudió sus nervios con mayor intensidad precisamente por la falta de preparación. Sintiendo cierta alarma y diciéndose que quizás habría podido obrar de otro modo, apresuró un poco el paso hacia la mesa lateral con objeto de dejar en ella los jarros que llevaba; pero en aquel momento pisó su delantal, que se le había desatado, y cayó ruidosamente en un lago de cerveza. Inmediatamente sonaron los gritos de entusiasmo de Marty y de Tommy y un grave «¡Demonios!» del señor Poyser, que veía aplazado su trago de cerveza.

—Muy bien —exclamó la señora Poyser en tono incisivo, levantándose y dirigiéndose al armario mientras Molly empezaba a recoger los trozos de cristal—. Ya te lo había avisado varias veces. Ahí tienes el

sueldo del mes y más todavía para pagarme este jarro que tenía en casa desde hace más de diez años, sin que nunca le hubiese sucedido nada. Lo que has roto en esta casa desde que estás aquí sería suficiente para hacer blasfemar a un cura. ¡Dios me perdone por hablar así! Pero si eso hubiese estado hirviendo habrías hecho lo mismo, escaldándote y quedando lisiada para toda la vida. Verdaderamente no sé lo que será de ti si continúas de esta manera. Cualquiera creería que tienes el baile de San Vito. Hay que ver las cosas que has llegado a tirar al suelo. Parece mentira que no tengas más cuidado. Quien te viese pensaría que eres tonta de capirote.

Molly lloraba derramando abundantes lágrimas y, en su desesperación, en el momento en que la corriente de cerveza se dirigía hacia las piernas de Alick, convirtió su delantal en bayeta, mientras que la señora Poyser, que abría el aparador, dirigió hacia ella una mirada incendiaria.

—¡Ah! —continuó diciendo—, nada sacarás de llorar y de mojar más el suelo con tus lágrimas. De todo eso tiene la culpa tu testarudez, porque a nadie se le rompe nada cuando hace el trabajo como es debido. Pero las personas que tienen un tarugo por cabeza no pueden manejar más que cosas de madera, para no romperlas. Ahora no tengo más remedio que sacar el jarro de color blanco y pardo, que aún no se ha usado tres veces este año, y bajar yo misma a la bodega, donde me cogerá un frío de muerte que tal vez sea la causa de una inflamación pulmonar.

La señora Poyser se volvió desde el aparador empuñando el jarro blanco y pardo, pero en aquel momento vio algo en el extremo opuesto de la cocina. Tal vez el hecho de que la aparición ejerciera en ella tanta influencia se debiese a que ya estaba temblorosa y nerviosa; también es posible que romper jarros, a semejanza de otros crímenes, tenga una influencia contagiosa. Pero, fuera como fuese, se quedó mirando con los ojos muy abiertos como si viese un fantasma y el precioso jarro pardo y blanco se cayó al suelo separándose para siempre del asa.

—¿Se ha visto jamás algo parecido? —exclamó con tono apagado después de mirar un momento asombrada a su alrededor—. Estos jarros están embrujados. No hay duda. Seguro que tienen las asas ya rotas; se deslizan entre los dedos como si fuesen babosas.

—¡Bueno! El caso es que mereces la misma reprimenda que todo el mundo —dijo el señor Poyser, que había tomado parte en la hilaridad de los niños.

—Sí. Es muy divertido eso de quedarse mirando y reírse —replicó la señora Poyser—. Pero te aseguro que hay ocasiones en que los cacharros parecen estar vivos y se te escapan de las manos como si fuesen pájaros. A veces ocurre con las cosas de vidrio, que, sin que nadie las toque, se parten por la mitad. Lo que está condenado a romperse, se rompe, porque a mí jamás se me ha caído nada por no cogerlo bien con los dedos. De lo contrario no conservaría, como conservo, toda la loza que compré antes de casarme. Y en cuanto a ti, Hetty, ¿estás loca? ¿Qué significa eso de presentarse vestida así y hacer creer a la gente que hay un duende en la casa?

En la cocina resonó otra carcajada general mientras la señora Poyser hablaba, y aquel acceso de hilaridad se debió menos a sus ideas fatalistas sobre las roturas de los jarros que a la extraña aparición de Hetty, causa también del sobresalto de su tía. Aquella picaruela había encontrado una vieja bata negra de su tía y se la había puesto, sujetándola alrededor del cuello para parecerse a Dinah; luego se peinó el cabello lo más liso que le fue posible y se cubrió la cabeza con uno de los gorros de red de aquélla, alto y desprovisto de adornos. Y la perspectiva de hallar debajo el rostro pálido y grave y los suaves ojos grises de Dinah se convertía en alegre sorpresa al ver que habían sido reemplazados por las sonrosadas y redondas mejillas de Hetty y por sus ojos oscuros y coquetones. Los niños se levantaron de la silla y la rodearon saltando y palmoteando, y hasta Alick profirió una grave carcajada desde el lugar en que se hallaba. Aprovechando el ruido, la señora Poyser se apresuró a enviar a Nancy a la bodega con una gran medida de peltre, que tenía algunas probabilidades de estar libre de los encantamientos.

—¡Caramba, Hetty! ¿Te has vuelto metodista? —preguntó el señor Poyser con la lenta carcajada que sólo emiten las personas corpulentas—. Antes de que puedas parecerlo será preciso que se te adelgace un poco más la cara. ¿Verdad, Adam? ¿Por qué te has puesto todo eso?

—Adam ha dicho que le gustan más el traje y el gorro de Dinah que los que yo llevo —contestó Hetty sentándose con gazmoñería—. Ha dicho que las personas tienen mejor aspecto cuando llevan trajes feos.

—No es eso —contestó Adam contemplándola con admiración—. Sólo he dicho que a Dinah le sentaba muy bien. Y si hubiese añadido que a usted le sientan perfectamente, no diría nada más que la verdad.

—Has pensado que Hetty era un fantasma, ¿eh? —preguntó el señor Poyser a su esposa, que volvía a ocupar su asiento—. Te has dado un susto de muerte.

—Qué importa eso ya —replicó la señora Poyser—, no arreglará los jarros rotos, ni tampoco las carcajadas. Siento mucho, señor Bede, que tenga que esperar tanto rato para beber un vaso de cerveza, pero

llegará dentro de un minuto. Sírvase usted mismo las patatas que quiera. Sé que le gustan. Mira, Tommy: si no dejas de reírte en el acto, te mando a la cama. ¿De qué te ríes? Me gustaría saberlo. Un gorrito no da para tanta risa. Ojalá la gente quisiera parecerse a Dinah en algo más que en el gorro. Además, no me parece bien que en esta casa se bromee a costa de la hija de mi hermana, que acaba de separarse de nosotros con gran disgusto por mi parte. Y si hay algo que sé es que si viniera la desgracia, si yo tuviese que guardar cama o mis niños estuvieran a punto de morir, porque nadie sabe lo que puede ocurrir, o el ganado volviese a tener la morriña, o, en fin, todo marchase de mal en peor, tengo la certeza de que a todos nos gustaría mucho ver otra vez el rostro de Dinah debajo de este gorro, tanto si es elegante como si no. Porque la pobrecilla siempre está dispuesta a acudir en caso de apuro y quiere a las personas más cuando más necesitadas están.

Como ya habrá observado el lector, la señora Poyser sabía muy bien que nada podía derrotar a lo cómico como lo terrible.

Tommy, que era un muchacho muy sensible y estaba muy encariñado con su madre, aparte de que había comido tantas cerezas que se sentía menos dueño de sí mismo que de costumbre, se asustó tanto con el horroroso cuadro que su madre hizo de un futuro posible que se echó a llorar; y el bondadoso padre, indulgente con todas las debilidades salvo la pereza, dijo a Hetty:

—Mejor te quites todo eso, hija mía. A tu tía le da pena.

Cuando Hetty subió de nuevo la escalera, la llegada de la cerveza constituyó una agradable distracción, pues Adam tuvo que dar su opinión sobre la calidad de la nueva cerveza, la cual, naturalmente, fue halagadora para la señora Poyser; luego siguió una discusión acerca de los secretos de la fabricación de la cerveza, conviniendo todos en que resultaba una economía muy dudosa de que los granjeros se hiciesen su propia malta. La señora Poyser tuvo tantas oportunidades de lucir sus conocimientos, que al terminar la cena volvió a llenar el jarro de cerveza y, cuando el señor Poyser hubo encendido la pipa, la buena mujer estaba ya de excelente humor y dispuesta, a petición de Adam, a ir en busca del torno de hilar.

—¡Ah! —dijo Adam después de examinarlo—. Eso es trabajo de tornero. Hay que hacer una rueda nueva. Lo llevaré al tornero del pueblo, pues en casa no tengo lo necesario. Si me hace el favor de mandar mañana el torno al taller del señor Burge, lo tendrá reparado el miércoles próximo. Precisamente ahora —continuó diciendo— quiero arreglar un poco el taller de mi casa para hacer trabajos de ebanistería. En horas libres siempre me he dedicado a eso, y es perfecto, porque no da mucho trabajo y no se necesitan grandes cantidades de material. Seth y yo vamos a empezar a trabajar por nuestra cuenta de este modo, pues conozco a un hombre de Rosseter que nos comprará cuanto hagamos y además tendremos encargos del mismo pueblo.

El señor Poyser escuchó muy interesado ese proyecto, que consideró un paso más que daba el joven para alcanzar su independencia; y luego dio su aprobación al modelo del armario de cocina destinado a contener, de un modo ordenado y claro, especias, objetos de loza, paños y trapos de cocina. Hetty, que vestía otra vez su propio traje y llevaba el pañuelo echado hacia atrás por el calor, estaba sentada cerca de la ventana ocupada en escoger las grosellas, y Adam podía verla muy bien. Así trascurrió el tiempo agradablemente hasta que el joven se puso en pie para marcharse. Le invitaron a volver pronto, pero no a quedarse un rato más, pues en aquella época de tanto trabajo a nadie le gustaba levantarse a las cinco de la mañana con sueño.

—Creo que voy a visitar al maestro Massey —dijo Adam—, pues ayer no estuvo en la iglesia y hace ya una semana que no le veo. Hasta ahora nunca había faltado a la iglesia.

—No sabemos nada de él —dijo el señor Poyser—; ahora los chicos tienen vacaciones y no puedo darle noticias del maestro.

—¿Pero cree que es conveniente ir a su casa a estas horas de la noche? —exclamó la señora Poyser mientras doblaba la labor de calceta.

—¡Oh! Massey se acuesta muy tarde, además aún no ha terminado la clase nocturna. Algunos de los alumnos acuden a la escuela muy tarde, pues viene de muy lejos. Y el mismo Barde no se acuesta hasta las once.

—Pues entonces no me gustaría que viviese con nosotros —dijo la señora Poyser—. Esos individuos se duermen a veces con la vela encendida, se derrite el sebo y se cae al suelo, y a la mañana siguiente quien entre en la habitación corre el peligro de romperse la crisma.

—¡Caramba! Las once es tarde. Muy tarde —repitió el viejo Martin—. En toda mi vida no me he acostado a esa hora, salvo cuando asistía a una boda o a un bautizo, o me quedaba de guardia en el campo, o bien cuando celebrábamos la cena de la cosecha. Las once de la noche es una hora muy avanzada.

—Pues yo me acuesto muchas veces después de las doce —dijo Adam riéndose—. Pero no porque me

entretenga bebiendo o comiendo, sino porque me quedo a trabajar. Buenas noches, señora Poyser. Buenas noches, Hetty.

La joven sólo pudo corresponder con una sonrisa, pero no le fue posible dar la mano, pues la tenía manchada del jugo de las grosellas. Los demás, sin embargo, estrecharon cordialmente la gran mano que el joven les ofrecía, y le pidieron que volviera pronto.

—¿Qué te parece? —dijo el señor Poyser en cuanto Adam hubo desaparecido—. ¡Quedarse hasta después de las doce para trabajar! Pocos hombres de veintiséis años encontrarás que puedan comparársele. Si conquistas a Adam por marido, Hetty, estoy seguro de que llegarás a poseer un cochecillo.

Hetty iba de un lado a otro de la cocina ocupada en sus grosellas, y por esta razón su tío no vio el desdeñoso movimiento de cabeza con que ella le contestó. Ahora ya no le parecía cosa envidiable ir en un cochecillo.

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La escuela nocturna y el maestro

La casa de Barde Massey era una de las pocas diseminadas en el extremo del pueblo que cruzaba el camino de Treddleston. Adam llegó allí un cuarto de hora después de haber salido de Hall Farm, y al apoyar la mano en el picaporte, vio a través de la ventana ocho o nueve cabezas inclinadas sobre los pupitres y alumbradas por delgadas velas.

Al entrar advirtió que era clase de lectura, y Barde Massey se limitó a saludarle con un movimiento de cabeza dejándole que se sentara donde quisiera. Aquella noche no había ido a tomar lección y su mente estaba demasiado ocupada con asuntos personales, llena de recuerdos por las dos horas pasadas con Hetty para entretenerse con un libro hasta que terminara la hora de clase. Por esta razón se sentó en un rincón y dejó vagar su mirada por la habitación. Durante muchos años Adam había contemplado aquella misma escena. Sabía de memoria todos los rasgos y arabescos del modelo de caligrafía de Barde Massey suspendido de la pared y sobre la cabeza del maestro, como si quisiera ofrecer un elevado ideal a las mentes de sus discípulos. Conocía los lomos de todos los libros del estante situado en la pared por encima de los clavos destinados a colgar las pizarras; recordaba cuántos granos de maíz se habían caído de la mazorca que colgaba de una de las vigas; durante mucho tiempo se esforzó en agotar los recursos de su imaginación para comprender qué aspecto había tenido el mazo de algas correosas y cómo crecieron en su líquido elemento; y desde el lugar en que se hallaba casi no podía distinguir el viejo mapa de Inglaterra que colgaba de la pared opuesta, pues con los años había adquirido un color pardo amarillento parecido al de una pipa de espuma de mar. La escena que se desarrollaba era muy familiar para él; mas la costumbre no le hizo indiferente, de modo que, a pesar de sus preocupaciones, Adam se sintió momentáneamente interesado por los alumnos: aquellos hombres rudos que sostenían penosamente el lápiz o la pluma con sus manos entumecidas, o que recibían humildemente la clase de lectura. Estos últimos eran los tres alumnos más atrasados y se sentaban enfrente del pupitre del maestro. Adam lo habría notado solamente con fijarse en la cara de Barde Massey mientras éste miraba por encima de sus gafas, que en ese momento hizo descender apoyándolas en el extremo de la nariz pues no las necesitaba. El rostro del maestro había tomado su expresión más suave; las espesas y grises cejas dibujaban el ángulo más agudo de bondad compasiva, y la boca, habitualmente apretada y con el labio inferior sobresaliente, parecía dispuesta a pronunciar una palabra o sílaba de auxilio en el momento que fuese necesario. Aquella cariñosa expresión era de lo más interesante porque la nariz del maestro, aquilina, irregular y ligeramente torcida, tenía un carácter formidable; y su frente mostraba aquella tensión peculiar que siempre da indicios de un temperamento extremadamente impaciente; las venas azules surgían como cuerdas bajo la piel transparente y amarillenta, y la frente terrible quedaba suavizada por la abundancia de cabello, grueso y gris.

—No, Bill, no —decía Bartle con tono bondadoso y haciendo una seña a Adam—. Vuelve a empezar y tal vez sepas cómo se pronuncian la *d*, la *r* y la *y*. Es la misma lección de la semana pasada. Ya te acordarás, no te preocupes.

Bill era un individuo robusto, de unos veinticuatro años, excelente aserrador de piedra y capaz de ganar el mejor jornal que pudiese conseguir un muchacho de su edad; pero sin duda le parecía mucho más difícil la lección de lectura de palabras monosilábicas que el habérselas con la piedra más dura que hubiese aserrado en su vida. Se quejaba de que las letras se parecían tanto que no había manera de distinguirlas, pues, como ya es sabido, su oficio no le exigía hacer tan diminutas distinciones como las que existen entre una letra cuyo rabo se dirige hacia arriba y otro que lo tenga en dirección opuesta. Sin embargo, Bill estaba

firmemente decidido a aprender a leer, y eso por dos razones: la primera, porque su primo Tom Hazelow podía leer muy bien cualquier cosa, ya estuviese impresa o manuscrita, y además le había escrito una carta desde treinta kilómetros de distancia contándole que prosperaba en el mundo y que le habían dado un empleo de encargado. En segundo lugar, porque Sam Phillips, que era su compañero de trabajo, había aprendido a leer después de cumplir los veinte años. Y Bill se creía capaz de hacer lo mismo que Sam puesto que se sentía con fuerzas para vencerle en todo. Y así, señalaba con el dedo índice tres palabras al mismo tiempo y volvía la cabeza hacia un lado para poder fijarse mejor en la que debía leer de aquel grupo. La cantidad de conocimientos que Barde Massey debía de poseer era algo tan impreciso y enorme, que la imaginación de Bill retrocedía asustada. Y seguramente no se habría atrevido a negar que el maestro tuviese algo que ver en la sucesión de los días y las noches y en los cambios de tiempo.

El hombre sentado al lado de Bill pertenecía a un tipo diferente: era un ladrillero metodista que después de pasar treinta años de su vida muy satisfecho de su ignorancia, «adquirió religión» y, con ella, el deseo de leer la Biblia. Pero también para él la instrucción resultaba algo muy duro y aquella misma noche, al salir, rezó solicitando auxilio, puesto que había emprendido aquella dura tarea con el único objeto de alimentar mejor su alma, conocer mayor cantidad de frases bíblicas y de himnos que le ayudasen a desterrar los malos recuerdos y las tentaciones de sus antiguas costumbres, o, en una palabra, al mismo diablo. El ladrillero había sido un famoso cazador furtivo y hasta se sospechaba, si bien no había pruebas contra él, que disparó un tiro en la pierna de un guarda jurado. Pero, fuese o no verdad esto último, lo cierto es que después del accidente, que coincidió con la llegada de un predicador metodista a Treddleston, se observó un gran cambio en el ladrillero; y aunque en la vecindad se le conocía con el renombre de Azufre, nada le aterraba tanto como seguir tratando al malvado enemigo que olía a dicha sustancia mineral. Era un individuo de ancho pecho y de temperamento fervoroso, lo cual le hacía más apto para adquirir ideas religiosas que para el humano conocimiento del alfabeto. Además un correligionario había debilitado su resolución asegurándole que la letra era enemiga del espíritu, y expresó el temor de que Azufre tuviese un interés exagerado en adquirir conocimientos.

El tercer principiante era un alumno que prometía mucho más. De alta estatura, flaco y sarmentoso, y casi tan viejo como Azufre, tenía el rostro pálido y las manos teñidas de azul. Era tintorero, y mientras estaba ocupado en sus trabajos de teñir las madejas de fabricación casera y las faldas de las viejas, se sintió impulsado por la ambición de aprender algo más acerca de los extraños secretos de los colores. Gozaba ya de gran reputación en la comarca por sus tintes y se esforzaba en descubrir algún método para reducir el gasto que le daban los colores carmesíes y escarlatas. El droguero de Treddleston le dio a entender que podría ahorrar mucho trabajo y dinero aprendiendo a leer, y por eso empezó a dedicar sus horas libres a la escuela nocturna, resuelto también a que su hijo no perdiera el tiempo y acudiera a las clases diurnas del señor Massey en cuanto tuviese la edad adecuada.

Era conmovedor ver a aquellos tres hombres hechos y derechos, con las huellas del duro trabajo diario visibles en sus cuerpos, inclinándose con tanto interés sobre los viejos y desgastados libros para leer, a costa de grandes esfuerzos, frases semejantes a «La hierba es verde», «La leña está seca», «El trigo está maduro», o las aún más difíciles columnas de palabras muy semejantes salvo por la primera letra. Parecían tres enormes animales salvajes haciendo humildes esfuerzos para aprender a ser humanos. Y ver a tan crecidos alumnos como aquéllos conmovía las fibras más sensibles de Barde Massey, de ahí que nunca les dirigiese severos epítetos ni palabras impacientes. El maestro no gozaba ni mucho menos de un carácter imperturbable y en las noches musicales se hacía evidente que la virtud de la paciencia no le había tocado en suerte; pero aquella noche, mientras miraba a Bill Downes por encima de sus lentes volver la cabeza a un lado en su esfuerzo desesperado por distinguir las letras *d*, *r*, e *y*, sus ojos despidieron un breve resplandor.

Después de la clase de lectura, dos jóvenes entre dieciséis y diecinueve años llegaron con imaginarias facturas escritas en sus pizarras. El maestro les invitó a calcular mentalmente y la prueba obtuvo tan poco éxito que Barde Massey, tras dirigirles una mirada amenazadora a través de sus lentes durante unos minutos, empezó a hablar casi a gritos, recalcando las frases mientras golpeaba la mesa con el bastón.

—Está claro que no habéis mejorado en quince días, y ahora os voy a decir la causa. Queréis aprender a contar, y eso está muy bien, pero creéis que basta con venir aquí dos o tres horas por semana y que en cuanto salís a la calle ya no hay que hacer nada más. No pensáis más que en divertiros y, por consiguiente, olvidáis lo que os enseño. Os figuráis también que los conocimientos se adquieren sin esfuerzo. Venís a la escuela del viejo Massey pagándole seis peniques por semana y creyendo que os enseñará a contar sin que vosotros os molestéis para nada. Pero si queréis adquirir instrucción, os costará algo más de seis peniques. Si queréis aprender a calcular, es preciso hacerlo mentalmente, fijándoos bien. Saber hacer una suma es fácil, pues después de escribir los sumandos en un papel cualquiera sabe hacerlo, por tonto que sea. Y así

podéis deciros: «Yo soy un tonto, y Jim otro. Si mi tonta cabeza pesa cuatro kilos y la de Jim tres kilos trescientos, ¿cuánto pesa más la mía que la de Jim?». El hombre que desee aprender a calcular ha de proponerse sumas él mismo y buscar mentalmente la solución. Cuando está sentado haciendo zapatos, puede contar los puntos de cinco en cinco, calcular el precio a que sale cada punto y averiguar cuánto gana en una hora; luego puede preguntarse cuánto dinero ganaría al cabo del día y, finalmente, cuál sería el jornal de diez obreros que trabajasen tres años, veinte o cien. Mientras tanto podrá manejar su aguja tan deprisa como de costumbre, como si tuviese la cabeza ocupada en tonterías. Pero, en fin, haced lo que queráis. Cuanto menos estudiéis, más tiempo tardaréis en aprender. Ninguno de mis alumnos de las clases nocturnas viene aquí a perder el tiempo, todos trabajan con mucho interés. Por otra parte, yo no despido a nadie por ser tonto. Si Billy Taft, el idiota, quisiera aprender alguna cosa, yo no me negaría a enseñarle. En cambio, no quiero prodigar mis conocimientos a gente que cree que no debe hacer más que pagar seis peniques por semana. Por consiguiente, no volváis a presentaros ante mí si no me demostráis que habéis trabajado por vuestra parte, en vez de creer que yo trabajaré por vosotros. Esta es mi última palabra.

Con esta frase final, Barde Massey dio un golpe más fuerte con su bastón y los avergonzados muchachos salieron sin decir una palabra. Los demás alumnos no tenían otra cosa que hacer que mostrar sus cuadernos de escritura, en varias fases de progreso, desde simples rayas a escritura corriente. Y hasta los mismos errores de la escritura, por garrafales que fuesen, le parecían a Barde menos desagradables que las cuentas equivocadas. Juzgó con mayor severidad que de costumbre las *z* de Jacobo Storey, de las que el pobre muchacho había llenado una página con el rasgo superior en dirección contraria a la debida, pese a que él mismo se daba cuenta de que aquellas letras tenían algo equivocado. Para disculparse, adujo que se trataba de una letra que apenas se empleaba, y que a su juicio pusieron allí para terminar el alfabeto, porque el mismo efecto habría hecho el signo &.

Finalmente los alumnos cogieron los sombreros y salieron después de dar las buenas noches. Conocedor de las costumbres de su maestro, Adam se levantó y preguntó:

—¿Quiere que apague las velas, señor Massey?

—Sí, hijo mío. Apágalas todas menos ésta, que me servirá para ir al comedor. Y ahora que estás cerca, cierra la puerta de la calle —dijo Barde tomando el bastón y apoyándose en él para bajar del taburete.

Apenas estuvo en el suelo cuando se vio en la necesidad de aquel apoyo, pues la pierna izquierda del maestro era más corta que la derecha. Pero a pesar de su cojera, el buen Massey era un hombre tan activo que apenas podía creerse que aquello constituyese un hecho desgraciado, y si el lector le hubiese visto atravesar la clase y subir el escalón para entrar en la cocina, tal vez comprendería la razón de que los niños traviesos creyesen que podía llegar a correr y que su bastón les alcanzaría por deprisa que huyesen.

En cuanto apareció en la puerta de la cocina empuñando la vela, se oyó un leve quejido en el rincón de la chimenea y apareció una perra de color pardo oscuro, perteneciente a la inteligente raza de patas cortas y cuerpo largo. Se acercó a su amo arrastrándose por el suelo, meneando el rabo y vacilando antes de dar un solo paso, como si su afecto se dividiese penosamente entre el amo y lo que quedaba en el rincón de la chimenea.

—Bueno, Vixen. ¿Cómo están los pequeños? —preguntó el maestro de escuela acercándose al rincón de la chimenea y levantando la vela para alumbrar el canasto donde dos cachorros, ciegos todavía, levantaban la cabeza hacia la luz desde su nido de franela y lana.

Vixen no se resignaba siquiera a que su amo contemplase a sus hijitos, de modo que penetró en el cesto y volvió a salir, comportándose como una hembra loca e imprudente[6], aunque, al mismo tiempo, parecía ser juiciosa como un enano que tuviese cabeza y cuerpo de viejo y piernas diminutas.

—Veo que se ha hecho con una familia, señor Massey —dijo Adam sonriendo al entrar en la cocina—. Creí que la ley prohibía semejante cosa en esta casa.

—¿La ley? ¿De qué sirve la ley cuando un hombre es lo bastante estúpido para permitir la entrada de una mujer en la casa? —preguntó Barde alejándose del cesto con cierta amargura. Siempre hablaba de Vixen como de una mujer y parecía no advertir que empleaba una figura retórica—. De haber sabido que Vixen era mujer, no habría impedido que la ahogaran aquellos muchachos. Pero en cuanto la tuve en mis manos, no pude hacer más que admitirla en mi casa. Y mira lo que me ha regalado ahora esta moza hipócrita y desvergonzada.

Barde pronunció estas palabras con tono de reproche y miró a Vixen, que bajó la cabeza y luego lo observó, al parecer muy confusa.

—Y además me trajo estos cachorros el domingo y a la hora de ir a la iglesia. Habría pagado cualquier cosa por ser un criminal y estrangular a la madre y a los hijos con una sola cuerda.

—Me alegro mucho de que su ausencia de la iglesia no tuviese un motivo más importante —dijo Adam

—. Temí que estuviese enfermo por primera vez en su vida. Y lamenté mucho no verle ayer.

—Ya lo sé, hijo, ya lo sé —dijo Barde con tono bondadoso y apoyando su mano hasta el hombro del joven, que casi se hallaba al mismo nivel de su propia cabeza—. Hasta ahora has pasado muchas penalidades, mas espero que te aguardan mejores tiempos. Tengo que darte algunas noticias, pero antes quiero cenar, tengo hambre. De modo que siéntate.

Barde se dirigió a su pequeña despensa y sacó un excelente pan hecho en casa; en aquellos tiempos era un lujo extraordinario comer pan una vez al día en vez de torta de avena. El maestro se justificaba diciendo que debido a sus ocupaciones necesitaba tener el cerebro bien nutrido y que las tortas de avena alimentaban más los huesos que la cabeza. Luego sacó un pedazo de queso y un jarro de litro coronado de espuma y los dejó en una mesita redonda que había al lado del sillón junto a la chimenea, flanqueada por el cesto de Vixen a un lado y por un estante con libros en el otro. La mesa estaba tan limpia como si Vixen hubiese sido una excelente ama de casa provista de un delantal de cuadros, y el mismo aspecto tenían el suelo, la antigua prensa de roble esculpido, la mesa y las sillas, mobiliario por el que en nuestra época las grandes casas pagarían sumas muy elevadas, pero que en los días en que estaban de moda los muebles con patas de araña y cupidos incrustados, Barde los había adquirido a cambio de una vieja canción.

—Acércate, muchacho, acércate; aunque no hablaremos de negocios hasta después de cenar. Ningún hombre habla con juicio con el estómago vacío. Pero —añadió Barde poniéndose de nuevo en pie— debo dar la cena a esa maldita Vixen, aunque ahora la desvergonzada no hace otra cosa que criar a esos cachorros innecesarios. Todas las mujeres hacen lo mismo. Como no tiene cerebro que alimentar, la comida se convierte en grasa o en cachorros.

Sacó de la despensa un plato con restos de comida en el cual Vixen fijó enseguida la mirada, saltando de su cesto para dar cuenta de ello en un abrir y cerrar de ojos.

—Yo he cenado ya, señor Massey —dijo Adam—, así que me quedaré mirando cómo lo hace usted. He estado en Hall Farm donde, como ya sabe, cenan temprano, pues se acuestan con las gallinas.

—Poco sé acerca de sus costumbres —replicó Barde con cierta sequedad y mientras cortaba el pan—. Voy muy pocas veces a su casa, aunque me son muy simpáticos los muchachos, y Martin Poyser es un hombre muy agradable. Para mi gusto, hay demasiadas mujeres en aquella casa. Odio el ruido de sus voces, porque zumban o chillan sin parar. La señora Poyser habla con una voz tan aguda como un pífano, y en cuanto a las jóvenes, preferiría contemplar a unas larvas acuáticas que, como ellas, han de convertirse en mosquitos que te pican y te asaetan. Toma un poco de cerveza, muchacho. La he sacado para ti.

—No, señor Massey —contestó Adam, que aquella noche tomaba más en serio que nunca la manía de su viejo amigo—. No debe ser tan duro con los seres que Dios creó para que fuesen nuestras compañeras. A un obrero le iría muy mal no tener una esposa que cuidara de la casa y de la comida y que no lo mantuviera todo limpio y cómodo.

—¡Tonterías! Es una de las mentiras más estúpidas que han inventado los hombres eso de que una mujer contribuye a la comodidad de la casa. Esta versión circula porque como existen las mujeres, hay que darles alguna ocupación. Yo te aseguro que no hay nada en el mundo que un hombre no pueda hacer mejor que una mujer, a excepción, naturalmente, de tener hijos, e incluso eso lo hacen bastante mal. Ojalá pudiesen encargarse los hombres también de eso. Una mujer es capaz de hacerte un pastel cada semana, durante toda su vida, y no llegar a comprender que cuanto más caliente esté el horno, menos durará la operación. O también te hará potaje todos los días, durante veinte años seguidos, y nunca pensará en medir la proporción de la harina y de la leche. Un poco más o menos, pensará, no significa nada y, como es natural, a veces el potaje sólo será bueno para tirarlo a la basura. Ella, en cambio, pondrá la harina, la leche o el agua como excusa, y no se atribuirá nunca la culpa. Mírame a mí. Yo amaso mi propio pan, y todos los días lo hago igual, año tras año; pero si en la casa hubiese otra mujer además de Vixen, tendría que rogar todos los días a Dios que me diese paciencia, porque seguro que el pan saldría mal amasado y mal cocido; y en cuanto a la limpieza, mi casa está más limpia que cualquier otra del pueblo, a pesar de que todas están llenas de mujeres. El chico de Will Baker viene a ayudarme por las mañanas y en una hora lo limpiamos todo, sin ruido, hacemos lo mismo que una mujer en tres horas, quien, además, te echaría cubos de agua en las piernas y dejaría en medio del comedor los hierros de atizar el fuego para que tropezaras con ellos y te destrozaras las espinillas. No me digas que Dios ha creado a tales seres como compañeras de los hombres. No digo que no hiciese a Eva para ser la compañera de Adán en el Paraíso, porque allí no era posible estropear ninguna comida, ni existía otra mujer con la que pudiese chismorrear, así como tampoco forma alguna de hacer tonterías; y, sin embargo, fíjate en que se aprovechó de la única que tenía a su disposición para cometer la mayor torpeza del mundo. Pero decir que las mujeres son ahora una bendición para los hombres es una afirmación que no se halla en las Escrituras y que además es impía. Lo mismo sería decir

que las víboras y las avispas, así como los jabalíes y las fieras, son una bendición, cuando únicamente constituyen males en este estado de prueba de los que un hombre debe alejarse cuanto pueda en su vida, con la esperanza de que en la otra ya no tendrá que sufrirlos.

Barde se había enojado y excitado tanto en el curso de su invectiva, que olvidó la cena y sólo utilizaba el cuchillo para golpear la mesa con el mango. Y al pronunciar las últimas palabras, sus golpes eran tan frecuentes y su voz estaba tan irritada, que Vixen se creyó en el deber de salir del cesto y dar un ladrido.

—Cállate, Vixen —gritó Bartle volviéndose a ella—. Eres como las demás mujeres, te apresuras a meter baza antes de saber de qué se trata.

La perra volvió a meterse en el cesto muy humillada y su amo continuó en silencio la cena, pues Adam optó por no interrumpirle. Sabía que el anciano estaría de mejor humor después de cenar y de encender la pipa. Por otra parte, el joven ya estaba acostumbrado a oírle hablar de ese modo, pero jamás supo bastante de la vida pasada de Barde para explicarse si su visión de las comodidades del matrimonio estaban fundadas o no en la experiencia propia. Barde guardaba siempre una estricta reserva acerca de este particular, e incluso era un secreto el lugar en que había vivido antes de los veinte años, edad en la que, afortunadamente para los campesinos y artesanos de aquella ciudad, pasó a vivir entre ellos en calidad de único maestro de escuela. Y siempre que le dirigían una pregunta sobre este asunto, Barde contestaba: «¡Oh! Viví en muchos sitios, pero principalmente en el sur». Y para habitantes de Loamshire una ciudad o pueblo de África significaba lo mismo que ese «sur».

—Ahora, muchacho —dijo Barde en cuanto se hubo bebido el segundo jarro de cerveza y encendido la pipa—, ahora vamos a hablar. Pero, ante todo, dime si hoy has tenido alguna noticia especial.

—No. O por lo menos no me acuerdo.

—Bueno. Al parecer guardan el secreto —replicó Massey—. Yo me he enterado por casualidad, y creo que es una noticia que te interesa.

Entonces Barde chupó repetidas veces la pipa mirando al mismo tiempo a Adam fijamente. Aquel hombre impaciente no sabía conservar encendida la pipa dando continuas y suaves chupadas; se le apagaba con frecuencia y luego aspiraba el humo rápidamente para compensar. Por fin dijo:

—Satchell ha tenido un ataque de parálisis. Me enteré por el muchacho que enviaron a Treddleston en busca del médico antes de las siete de la mañana. Como ya sabes, tiene más de sesenta años y puede estar contento si no se muere de ésta.

—Creo que en la parroquia esta noticia producirá más alegría que tristeza —dijo Adam—. Es un hombre egoísta, chismoso e intrigante; además, nadie ha perjudicado al anciano caballero tanto como él. En realidad quien tiene la culpa de todo es el caballero, que ha confiado a ese hombre la administración de sus propiedades para ahorrarse el sueldo de un buen recaudador. Pero en realidad ha perdido bastante más que el sueldo de un par de administradores, a causa de la mala administración de los bosques. Tal vez ahora busque a otro hombre que le convenga más, pero no veo en qué me ha de beneficiar eso.

—Pues yo sí —replicó Barde—. Y otros lo ven tan bien como yo. Ya sabes que el capitán llegará pronto a su mayor edad y se supone que entonces su voto pesará más que ahora. También sabes, como yo, que el capitán aprovechará la primera oportunidad que se le presente para mejorar la administración de los bosques, y ha dicho delante de muchas personas que, si en su mano estuviese, te encargaría a ti de la administración. Carroll, el mayordomo del señor Irwine, se lo oyó decir hace muy pocos días. El sábado por la noche estábamos fumando una pipa en casa de Casson y llegó Carroll y nos lo contó. Además dijo que en cuanto alguien diga una palabra en tu favor, el párroco le apoyará. Te aseguro que en casa de Casson se habló largo y tendido de ti.

—¿Cómo? ¿Hablaron de eso delante del señor Burge? —preguntó Adam—. ¿Estaba allí?

—Estuvo, pero se marchó antes de la llegada de Carrol, y Casson, a quien siempre le gusta llevar la voz cantante, opinó que debía confiarse a Burge la administración de los bosques. «Es hombre de peso», dijo, «y tiene tal vez sesenta años de experiencia en las maderas. Adam Bede podría actuar bajo sus órdenes, pues no parece probable que el caballero lo llame para ocupar ese puesto cuando tiene a otros hombres mejores y de más experiencia al alcance de su mano». «Se equivoca, Casson», repliqué yo. «Tenga en cuenta una circunstancia: Burge es comprador de madera, de modo que resultaría una torpeza entregarle los bosques para que pudiera realizar sus propias compras. Supongo que usted no permitirá que sus clientes calculen a su criterio lo que han bebido. Y en cuanto a edad, eso es algo que depende de la calidad del vino. De sobra sabe todo el mundo quién lleva el negocio de Jonathan Burge».

—Le agradezco mucho esas palabras, señor Massey —contestó Adam—. Pero debo confesar que, por esta vez, Casson tenía razón. No es muy probable que el caballero consienta en contratarme, pues hace un par de años le ofendí y estoy seguro de que no me ha perdonado aún.

—¿Cómo fue eso? Nunca me lo habías contado —observó Barde.

—¡Oh! Se debió a una tontería. Hice un marco para un biombo de la señorita Lydia. Ya sabe que siempre está ocupada en labores. En esa ocasión me dio instrucciones muy concretas sobre ese biombo, de modo que se habló de él y se tomaron medidas como si estuviéramos planeando la construcción de una casa. Sin embargo, fue un trabajo muy bonito y lo hice con mucho gusto. Pero ya sabe que esas tonterías requieren bastante tiempo. Trabajaba en el marco en horas extraordinarias, a veces hasta muy tarde, y además tuve que ir en varias ocasiones a Treddleston para comprar clavos de bronce y cosas por el estilo. Hice tornear las patas y los extremos y luego realicé alguna labor de talla, de modo que el conjunto quedó bastante bien. Yo estaba satisfecho de mi trabajo y cuando lo llevé a la señorita Lydia me ordenó que se lo mostrase en la sala para darme instrucciones a fin de clavar la tela. Era una bonito bordado que representaba a Jacob y a Raquel besándose y rodeados de ovejas. El anciano caballero estaba sentado allí, como tiene por costumbre. En fin, la señorita estaba muy satisfecha de mi trabajo, y me preguntó el precio. Ya sabe que no hablo sin pensar. Había calculado el precio con exactitud, aunque no hice factura, y le dije que me debía una libra y trece chelines. Con eso quedaban pagados los materiales y mi trabajo, aunque no sobradamente. El caballero levantó los ojos al oírme, miró el biombo y dijo: «¿Una libra y trece chelines por ese trasto? Si gastas el dinero en estas tonterías, querida Lydia, vale más que te vayas a comprarlas a Rosseter en vez de pagar aquí un mal trabajo por el doble de lo que vale. Estas cosas no son para encargarlas a carpinteros como Adam. Dale una guinea, y nada más». La señorita Lydia creyó lo que el anciano le decía, y como no le gusta desprenderse de su dinero, aunque en el fondo no es mala mujer, empezó a abrir el bolso mientras se sonrojaba. Yo entonces le hice una reverencia y le dije: «No, señora; muchas gracias. Prefiero regalarles ese biombo, si me hace el favor de aceptarlo. Le he pedido el precio por mi trabajo, y sé que lo vale. Además, con permiso de su señoría, sé que en Rosseter no encontraría un biombo como ese por menos de dos guineas. Estoy dispuesto a regalarle mi trabajo, porque como lo he hecho en horas que me pertenecen, a nadie le importa lo que haga con ellas; pero, si quiere pagármelo, no puedo rebajar el precio, pues eso sería dar a entender que le pedí más de lo justo. Así, con su permiso, señora, me despido». Incliné la cabeza y salí antes de que pudiese contestarme, porque se quedó con el bolso en la mano y sin saber qué hacer. Yo no quise mostrarme irrespetuoso, y hablé con cuanta cortesía pude, pero no consiento que alguien crea que le engaño. Aquella misma tarde, el lacayo de la casa me entregó una libra y trece chelines envueltos en un papel. Y desde entonces estoy seguro que el caballero no me soporta.

—Es probable —contestó Bartle pensativo—. El único modo de convencerle sería demostrarle que sus intereses saldrían beneficiados, y eso solamente puede lograrlo el capitán.

—No lo sé —replicó Adam—, el caballero es bastante inteligente, pero la inteligencia no basta para hacer que la gente se convenza de lo que le interesa. Hay que tener juicio para distinguir lo malo de lo bueno, y será difícil convencer al viejo de que ganará tanto o más obrando correctamente que valiéndose de ardides e intrigas. Además, yo no tengo ningún interés en trabajar a sus órdenes. No quiero pelearme con ningún caballero y menos con un anciano que, como él, tiene más de ochenta años. No creo que estuviéramos mucho tiempo de acuerdo. Si el capitán fuese dueño de la propiedad, la cosa cambiaría por completo. Es hombre de conciencia, que quiere actuar bien, y a mí me gustaría más trabajar para él que para otro.

—Bueno, bueno, muchacho, cuando la fortuna llame a tu puerta, no salgas a la ventana para decirle que se aleje. Has de aprender a calcular en la vida igual que con los números. Y ahora te repito lo que te dije hace diez años, cuando diste una paliza a Mike Holdsworth, que quería pasar un chelín falso, antes de enterarte si lo hacía en broma o en serio. Eres demasiado orgulloso y siempre estás a punto para enfrentarte a las personas que no opinan como tú. Que yo sea un poco irritable y gruñón, pase: soy un viejo maestro y no deseo ni necesito ascender. ¿Pero para qué he perdido el tiempo enseñándote a escribir, a dibujar y a medir si no has de progresar en el mundo y demostrar a todo el mundo que vale más tener una cabeza que una zanahoria sobre los hombros? ¿Acaso vas a perder las oportunidades que se te ofrezcan porque percibas un olor que nadie ha notado más que tú? Es una tontería tan grande como la de creer que una esposa es capaz de proporcionar comodidades a un hombre. ¡Tonterías y nada más que tonterías! Deja que crean eso las personas que no saben ni sumar. Suma un tonto con otro tonto, y a los seis años hay seis tontos más.

Durante esta exhortación se había apagado la pipa; Barde se interrumpió para encender una cerilla visiblemente irritado, y luego chupó con resolución, fijando su mirada en Adam, que se esforzaba por no echarse a reír.

—Hay mucho de verdad en lo que dice, señor Massey —replicó el joven en cuanto consiguió contenerse —. Pero comprenderá que mis esperanzas no han de basarse en cosas improbables. Lo que he de hacer es trabajar lo mejor posible, con los materiales y las herramientas de que dispongo. Si se presenta una buena

oportunidad, pensaré en lo que me ha dicho; pero hasta entonces no confiaré más que en mi cabeza y en mis manos. He decidido dedicarme con mi hermano Seth a trabajos de ebanistería en horas extraordinarias, a fin de ganar una o dos libras más. Pero ahora ya es tarde y no llegaré a casa antes de las once. Y es posible que mi madre permanezca despierta, pues está más impaciente que nunca. Así que buenas noches.

—Bueno, bueno. Te acompañaré hasta la puerta. Hace una noche muy hermosa —dijo Barde tomando el bastón.

Vixen se puso en pie a su vez y, sin cruzar más palabras, los dos hombres salieron acompañados por la perra a la luz de las estrellas, cruzaron el campo de patatas de Barde y se encaminaron al portón.

—Si puedes, ven a cantar el viernes por la noche —dijo el viejo mientras cerraba el portón y luego se apoyaba en él.

—Sí, sí —contestó Adam encaminándose hacia la pálida faja del camino.

No había nadie más moviéndose por el pueblo a esas horas. Los dos asnos grises que se distinguían frente a unas matas de aulaga estaban tan inmóviles como si fuesen de piedra. Barde fijó la mirada en la figura de su amigo hasta que desapareció en la oscuridad, mientras que Vixen, indecisa entre los dos objetos de su afecto, se metió dos veces en la casa para dar un lametón a sus cachorros.

—Sí, sí —murmuró el maestro mientras Adam desaparecía—. Cada día progresas algo, pero no serías lo que eres si no tuvieses en tu cabeza una parte del cojo Barde. Hay muchos mozos fuertes y grandes como una torre que nunca habrían sabido el ABC de no haber sido por Barde Massey. ¿Qué quieres, Vixen, desvergonzada e indecente? ¿Qué ocurre? ¿Quieres que vaya adentro? ¡Ay de mí! ¡Ya nunca más volveré a ser el dueño de mi casa! ¿Y qué haré de esos perrillos cuando sean dos veces más grandes que tú? Porque estoy seguro que el padre es ese enorme *bull-terrier* de Will Baker. ¿No es así, desvergonzada indecente?

Al oír estas palabras, Vixen se metió el rabo entre las piernas y echó a correr hacia la casa, porque a veces hay asuntos que las hembras bien educadas deben callar.

—Pero ¿qué se saca de hablar a una mujer con hijos? —continuó Barde—. No tienen conciencia ni vergüenza, ¡y para qué llorar por la leche derramada!

LIBRO TERCERO

XXII

Hacia la fiesta de cumpleaños

Era el 13 de julio, y hacía uno de esos pocos días calurosos —media docena escasa— que a veces se dan hacia la mitad del lluvioso verano inglés. No había llovido en tres o cuatro días y el tiempo era magnífico para aquella época del año; había menos polvo que de costumbre en los setos oscuros y la manzanilla silvestre que crecían a lo largo de los caminos; sin embargo, la hierba estaba lo bastante seca para que los niños pudiesen revolcarse por ella, y no había ninguna nube, sólo una larga franja de luz suave, ondulada y muy alta en el cielo lejano. Era un tiempo magnífico para una fiesta de julio al aire libre, aunque tal vez no el mejor día del año para nacer. La naturaleza parece hacer una cálida pausa en semejantes días; las flores más hermosas han desaparecido, la dulzura de los primeros brotes y de las vagas esperanzas ha pasado ya. Y no obstante aún no ha llegado la época de la siega y de almacenar el grano, y temblamos ante la posibilidad de que una tormenta destruya el precioso fruto en el momento en que ha alcanzado la madurez. Los bosques tienen un color uniforme verde oscuro. Las carretadas de heno ya no circulan por los caminos, derramando parte de su aromática carga sobre las ramas de las moras. Los pastos tienen un ligero tono pardusco, pero el trigo no ha alcanzado aún su último esplendor rojo y oro. Los corderos y los terneros han perdido ya toda huella de su carácter inocente y juguetón y se han convertido en estúpidos carneros y en vacas jóvenes. Pero en las granjas reinan ahora unos días de descanso; es la pausa que se hace entre las cosechas del heno y del trigo, y los granjeros y labradores de Hayslope y Broxton piensan que el capitán llega a su mayoría de edad en un momento muy oportuno, pues así ellos podrán gozar sin temor de los placeres del gran barril de cerveza que se fabricó el otoño siguiente al nacimiento del heredero y que había de beberse cuando cumpliese veintiún años. Desde primeras horas de la mañana el sonido de las campanas de la iglesia ha alegrado el ambiente, y ahora todo el mundo se apresura a acabar el trabajo impostergable antes de las doce, hora en que habrá que emprender el camino hacia el cazadero.

El sol del mediodía penetraba en el dormitorio de Hetty por la ventana desprovista de postigos y caía directamente sobre su cabeza mientras ésta se contemplaba en el antiguo y moteado espejo. Pero era el único en el que podía verse el cuello y los brazos, pues tenía otro más pequeño que había cogido de la habitación de al lado —la que había sido de Dinah—, que no le permitía verse más que la barbilla y aquella hermosa parte del cuello donde la redondez de las mejillas se confundía con otras redondeces sombreadas por los oscuros rizos del cabello. Y aquel día pensaba más que nunca en su cuello y en sus brazos, porque en el baile de la tarde no llevaría ningún pañuelo, y el día anterior se había empleado a fondo en su traje de color rosa y blanco para llevar las mangas largas o cortas según le apeteciese. En ese momento vestía igual que lo haría por la tarde, y llevaba un camisolín de encaje «verdadero» que le había prestado su tía para tan extraordinaria ocasión, pero no tenía ningún otro adorno, pues incluso se había quitado los pendientes pequeños que llevaba todos los días. Pero al parecer le quedaba una cosa por hacer antes de ponerse el pañuelo y las mangas largas que había de llevar durante el día, pues abrió el cajón que contenía sus tesoros particulares. Aún no había pasado un mes desde que la vimos abrir aquel mismo cajón, el cual contenía ahora nuevos tesoros, mucho más preciosos que los antiguos, ya relegados a un rincón. Hetty no deseaba ponerse otra vez los grandes pendientes adornados con cristales de color, porque en una cajita forrada de satén blanco tenía a su disposición otros de oro, perlas y granates. ¡Oh! ¡Qué delicioso le resultó sacarlos de la cajita para contemplarlos! El lector no debe mostrarse filósofo, diciendo que Hetty, que ya era muy hermosa, debía de haber sabido que importaba muy poco llevar joyas o no; y que, además, el contemplar unos pendientes que sólo podía llevar en su dormitorio apenas podía darle ninguna satisfacción, puesto que

la esencia de la vanidad vive de las impresiones producidas en los demás; pero cuando se es demasiado razonable no se llega a entender la naturaleza femenina. Procure, pues, el lector, desprenderse de todo prejuicio racional, como si se quisiera estudiar la psicología de un canario, y limítese a observar los movimientos de aquella hermosa criatura mientras vuelve la cabeza a un lado, dirigiendo una sonrisa inconsciente a los pendientes encerrados en el estuche. Tal vez el lector se figurará que pensaba entonces en una persona que se los había regalado y que recordaba el momento en que recibió el obsequio. Nada de eso, pues en tal caso lo mismo le habrían importado los pendientes que otro adorno cualquiera y a mí me consta que prefería aquél a cualquier otro imaginable.

—¡Qué orejitas tan bonitas! —había dicho Arthur una tarde con la intención de pellizcarlas; Hetty estaba sentada en la hierba a su lado y sin sombrero.

—Me gustaría mucho tener unos pendientes —dijo ella casi sin darse cuenta, pues aquel anhelo estaba tan cerca de sus labios que lo exteriorizó inmediatamente.

Y al día siguiente, es decir, de eso hacía una semana, Arthur se dirigió a caballo a Rosseter para comprarlos. Aquel pequeño deseo expresado con tanta inocencia le había parecido algo encantador; jamás había oído nada semejante. Así que envolvió el estuche en muchos y grandes papeles para disfrutar viendo a Hetty mientras lo desenvolvía con creciente curiosidad, cosa que sucedió tal como había imaginado.

No. Hetty no pensaba en quien se los había regalado mientras los miraba, porque los sacó de la caja no para llevárselos a los labios, sino a fin de ponérselos en las orejas. Sólo un momento para ver lo bien que le sientan mientras los mira reflejados en el espejo de la pared, primero de un lado y luego del otro, como un pájaro que escucha. Es imposible no hacer tonterías con los pendientes siendo una muchacha tan hermosa como es, pues ¿con qué objeto habrían hecho aquellas perlas delicadas y aquellos cristales preciosos sino para tales orejas? Ni siquiera parecen un defecto los agujeritos que se ven en ellas en cuanto se quita los pendientes. Quizás las ondinas y otros seres sin alma posean naturalmente agujeros en las orejas a propósito para suspender joyas. Hetty debe de ser una de ellas. Es demasiado doloroso pensar que es una mujer, y que tiene un destino de mujer ante ella; una mujer que, en su joven ignorancia, teje una ligera red de locura y de vanas esperanzas a su alrededor, que un día se cerrará para oprimirla como un traje venenoso y rencoroso que convertirá sus juguetonas sensaciones de mariposa en una vida de profunda angustia humana.

Pero como no puede dejarse un rato puestos los pendientes, pues sus tíos la esperan, vuelve a colocarlos rápidamente en la caja y la cierra. Llegará el día en que podrá llevar los pendientes que quiera y ya en ese momento vive en un mundo invisible de brillantes trajes, resplandeciente gasa, satén suave y terciopelo, según ha visto en el guardarropa de la señorita Lydia que un día le enseñó la doncella del cazadero. Siente ya los brazaletes en sus muñecas y pisa una mullida alfombra al situarse ante un alto espejo. Pero aún tiene otra cosa en el cajón que quizás sí puede atreverse a llevar en esa ocasión colgada de la cadena de bayas marrón oscuro que suele ponerse en los días señalados, con un pequeño y achatado frasco de perfume en su extremo y metido dentro del traje —y Hetty *debe* ponerse las bayas de color marrón oscuro porque de lo contrario parecería que le falta algo a su cuello—. Hetty no estaba tan entusiasmada con el guardapelo como con los pendientes, aunque era grande y muy bonito y tenía unas flores esmaltadas en la parte posterior, así como un hermoso marco de oro en torno al cristal, que dejaba ver un mechón de cabello de color castaño y ligeramente ondulado, y sobre él dos rizos de cabello más oscuro. Podría llevar aquel guardapelo debajo del traje y así nadie lo vería. Pero Hetty tenía aún otra pasión, desde luego menor que su amor al lujo, y ésta, precisamente, era la que le obligaba a llevar el guardapelo oculto en el pecho. Lo habría llevado siempre si se hubiese atrevido a soportar las preguntas de su tía sobre el lazo rojo que se colgaría del cuello. Así que deslizó el guardapelo en la cadena de bayas y cerró el collar en torno a su cuello. La cadena era corta, y el guardapelo colgaba muy poco por debajo del escote de su vestido. En ese momento no le quedaba otra cosa que hacer que ponerse las mangas largas, su pañuelo nuevo de gasa y el sombrero de paja, aquel día adornado de blanco en vez de rosa, pues las antiguas cintas habían perdido el color con el sol de julio. Aquel sombrero constituía la gota que colmaba el vaso de la amargura de Hetty, pues no era nuevo y nadie dejaría de advertir que estaba bastante requemado; en cambio tema la certeza de que Mary Burge llevaría un sombrero o un gorro nuevos. En busca de consuelo contempló sus finas medias blancas de algodón realmente eran bonitas; había dado todo el dinero que tenía ahorrado a cambio de ellas. Los sueños que Hetty albergaba con respecto al futuro no la dejaban insensible al triunfo en el presente. Era indudable que el capitán Donnithorne la amaba, que no miraría siquiera a nadie más, pero, en cambio, la gente ignoraría que él la quería y a la joven no le gustaba aparecer a sus ojos mal vestida e insignificante, ni siquiera por un momento.

El grupo de los asistentes a la fiesta estaba reunido ya cuando la joven bajó; todos, por supuesto, con su

traje de los domingos; las campanas habían resonado de tal modo aquella mañana en honor del vigésimo primer aniversario del capitán, y se acabaron tan temprano los trabajos, que Marty y Tommy no estuvieron tranquilos hasta que su madre les aseguró que el ir a la iglesia no formaba parte de las festividades del día. El señor Poyser propuso dejar la casa a solas asegurando que «no había que temer que alguien entrase a robar, ya que todo el mundo estaría en el cazadero, incluso los ladrones».

—Si cerramos la casa —añadió—, todos los hombres podrán ir a la fiesta; éste es un día que no verán dos veces en toda su vida.

Pero la señora Poyser le contestó con decisión:

—Jamás he dejado abandonada la casa, y jamás la dejaré. La semana pasada vimos a bastantes vagabundos capaces de arramblar con todos nuestros jamones y cucharas. Y se ponen de acuerdo, preparan trampas, y ya podemos estar contentos de que no envenenen los perros para asesinarnos luego en la cama cualquier viernes por la noche, cuando tenemos en casa el dinero para pagar a los obreros. Además esos vagabundos saben tan bien como nosotros el lugar adonde vamos. Y si el viejo Harry quiere hacer una de las suyas, puedes apostarte cualquier cosa a que encontrará el medio.

—Eso de asesinarnos en la cama es una tontería —dijo el señor Poyser—. ¿Tengo o no tengo una escopeta en el dormitorio? Además, tú tienes un oído tan fino que descubrirías hasta un ratón que estuviese royendo el tocino. Pero para que estés tranquila, Alick puede quedarse en casa la mitad del día, y Tim volver hacia las cinco para relevarlo. Y si ven algún sospechoso, que suelten a Growler, y también al perro de Alick, que estará dispuesto a clavar los dientes en la pierna de cualquier vagabundo en cuanto su amo le haga la menor señal.

La señora Poyser aceptó este arreglo, pero creyó aconsejable atrancar puertas y ventanas. Luego, en el último momento, antes de emprender el camino, Nancy, la criada de la lechería, cerró los postigos de la casa, incluso los de la ventana que se hallaba bajo la inmediata observación de Alick y de los perros, que debía considerarse la menos indicada para sufrir cualquier intrusión.

El cochecillo cubierto y sin muelles estaba preparado para transportar a toda la familia, a excepción de los criados del género masculino. El señor Poyser y el abuelo ocuparon el asiento delantero; dentro había sitio para todas las mujeres y los niños; cuanto más lleno estuviese el vehículo, mejor, porque entonces el traqueteo no molestaría tanto, aparte de que la gruesa Nancy, que tenía unos brazos muy voluminosos, constituía un excelente almohadón para amortiguar los golpes. Pero el señor Poyser guió al paso para evitar cualquier riesgo de volcar en aquel día caluroso; y hasta hubo tiempo de cambiar saludos y observaciones con los que iban a pie y se dirigían al mismo lugar, puntitos de colores vivos que se movían sin cesar salpicaban los caminos entre los verdes prados y los dorados campos de trigo; un chaleco escarlata hacía juego con las amapolas que balanceaban sus cabezas entre el trigo, o bien el pañuelo azul oscuro, con los extremos flotantes, a través de una camisa blanca y flamante de obrero. Todo Broxton y todo Hayslope debían ir al cazadero a divertirse en honor del heredero. Y los viejos y viejas, que nunca habían llegado tan lejos en aquella dirección, por lo menos durante los últimos veinte años, hacían el viaje desde Broxton y Hayslope en uno de los carros de los granjeros por consejo del señor Irwine. Las campanas de la iglesia habían vuelto a tocar por última vez, y luego los compañeros descendieron por la ladera de la colina para tomar parte en la fiesta; y antes de que terminasen las campanadas se oyó otra música y el viejo Brown, el caballo que arrastraba el coche del señor Poyser, enderezó las orejas. Era la banda del Club Benéfico, que acudía vestida de luces: sus miembros llevaban brillantes chales azules y charreteras del mismo color y en su bandera se veía el lema «Viva el amor fraternal» en torno a un dibujo que representaba una cantera de piedra.

Como se comprenderá, los carruajes debían quedarse fuera del cazadero, todo el mundo había de apearse junto a la caseta del portero y hacer retroceder a los vehículos.

—El cazadero parece una feria —dijo la señora Poyser al bajar del coche viendo los grupos diseminados a la sombra de los grandes robles, mientras los muchachos corrían por las zonas soleadas para examinar las altas cucañas rematadas por los premios destinados a los vencedores—. Nunca habría pensado que en las dos parroquias hubiese tanta gente. ¡Dios mío! ¡Qué calor hace cuando uno se aleja de la sombra! Ven aquí, Totty, se te van a quemar las mejillas. Podrían haber guisado aquí con el calor del sol y se habrían ahorrado el gasto de leña. Voy a la habitación de la señora Best para descansar un poco.

—Espera, espera —dijo el señor Poyser—. Aquí viene al carro con los viejos. Seguro que no volveremos a verles apearse del carro y andar todos juntos. Se acuerda de algunos, ¿verdad, padre?

—¡Ya lo creo! —dijo el viejo Martin andando despacio a la sombra del soportal de la casa del portero, desde donde podía ver el grupo de ancianos que bajaban del carro—. Recuerdo que Jacob Taft anduvo ochenta kilómetros persiguiendo a los rebeldes escoceses cuando éstos se retiraron de Stoniton.

Él mismo se sintió rejuvenecido, como si tuviese una larga vida por delante, al ver el patriarca de Hayslope, el viejo tío Taft, descender del carro y avanzar hacia él con la cabeza cubierta por el gorro de dormir marrón y apoyado en sus dos bastones.

—¿Qué hay, señor Taft? —gritó el viejo Martin con cuanto vigor le fue posible, pues aunque le constaba que el viejo era sordo como una tapia, no pudo dejar de saludarle—. Es usted un hombre muy valiente. Aún podrá divertirse hoy, a pesar de sus noventa y pico de años.

—Soy su servidor, señores, su servidor —decía el tío Taft con voz temblorosa al advertir la gente que le rodeaba.

El grupo de ancianos, vigilados por sus hijos e hijas envejecidos y encanecidos a su vez, avanzó por el camino de carruajes en dirección a la casa, donde se les había preparado una mesa especial; mientras tanto, el grupo de Poyser atravesó tranquilamente la hierba a la sombra de los grandes árboles sin perder de vista la fachada de la casa, con su césped bien cortado y sus arriates de flores, y la hermosa carpa de tela a listas situada en un extremo del césped y en ángulo recto con otras dos carpas mayores, colocadas a cada lado del espacio abierto en que habían de celebrarse los juegos. La casa no habría sido más que una sencilla mansión cuadrada del tiempo de la reina a no ser por los restos de una antigua abadía con la que estaba unida por uno de sus extremos, del mismo modo como a veces se levanta una nueva granja en el extremo de otras construcciones más antiguas y bajas destinadas a la misma función. Los hermosos restos de aquel edificio quedaban un poco retirados y bajo la sombra de altas hayas; en ese momento el sol alumbraba la fachada más alta y saliente, que tenía todas las persianas corridas y la vivienda parecía dormida a causa del calor del mediodía. Hetty sintió pena. Arthur debía de estar en alguna de las habitaciones posteriores, acompañado de grandes personajes y no podría enterarse de su llegada ni la vería hasta mucho rato después, cuando acabaran de cenar y él hiciera acto de presencia para dirigir la palabra a sus invitados.

Pero Hetty se equivocaba en parte de sus conjeturas. No había llegado ningún personaje a excepción de los Irwine, para quienes se había enviado el coche muy temprano, y Arthur no se hallaba entonces en ninguna habitación de la parte trasera, sino que, en compañía del rector, paseaba por los anchos claustros de piedra de la vieja abadía donde se habían dispuesto las largas mesas para los arrendatarios y criados de las haciendas. Aquel día Arthur tenía el aspecto de un joven apuesto inglés, estaba muy contento y vestía un levitón de color azul brillante de última moda, y ya no llevaba el brazo en el cabestrillo. Era un hombre, como sabemos, franco y espontáneo, pero también este tipo de jóvenes tienen secretos que no dejan huella en sus rostros juveniles.

—La verdad es que los arrendatarios han tenido más suerte que nadie —dijo al entrar en los frescos claustros— porque esto es un estupendo comedor para un día caluroso como hoy. Nos dio un magnífico consejo con respecto a la comida, Irwine. Dar la mejor posible y sólo a los arrendatarios era lo que más nos convenía, teniendo en cuenta que yo sólo disponía de una cantidad limitada, porque aunque mi abuelo me habló de una *carte blanche*, al final no se decidió a confiar en mí.

—No importa, así todo el mundo disfrutará más —dijo el señor Irwine—. En estas cosas el pueblo confunde la liberalidad con el escándalo y el desorden. Resulta grandioso decir que se asaron muchos bueyes y ovejas enteros y que en el festín comió todo el que quiso; pero al final lo que ocurre es que nadie come bien. Si da a la gente una buena comida y una cantidad moderada de cerveza al mediodía, podrán divertirse con los juegos en cuanto el sol empiece a perder fuerza. No puede impedir que algunos estén un poco mareados al atardecer, pero la verdad es que la borrachera armoniza mejor con la oscuridad que con la luz.

—No creo que tengamos muchos borrachos. Por de pronto ya me he librado de la gente de Treddleston dándoles una fiesta especial en la ciudad. He encargado a Casson, a Adam Bede y a otros buenos muchachos que vigilen la cerveza y no permitan que las cosas vayan demasiado lejos. Pero ahora veamos si están dispuestas las mesas para los arrendatarios más importantes arriba.

Subieron la escalera de piedra que conducía a la larga galería que había sobre los claustros y en la que habían desaparecido ya las antiguas pinturas llenas de polvo por lo menos desde tres generaciones anteriores. Eran malos retratos de la reina Isabel y de sus damas, del general Monk con su ojo tuerto, Daniel entre los leones y Julio César a caballo, con una nariz prominente y una corona de laurel sosteniendo en la mano sus *Comentarios*.

—Es muy agradable que hayan salvado esta parte de la antigua abadía —dijo Arthur—. Si alguna vez llego a ser el amo de este lugar, haré restaurar la galería, porque en la casa no tengo ninguna sala tan grande como ésa. La segunda mesa está destinada a las esposas de los granjeros y a los niños. La señora Best dijo que las mujeres y las criaturas estarían más cómodas separadas de los demás. Yo me empeñé en que vinieran los niños para reunir a toda la familia. Yo seré más tarde «el viejo caballero» para esos niños, y

éstos referirán a sus hijos que yo era un joven mucho más agradable que mi propio hijo. Abajo también hay otra mesa para las mujeres y los niños. Pero ya los verá a todos, porque espero que me acompañará después de cenar.

—Desde luego —dijo el señor Irwine—. No quiero perderme su primera alocución a los arrendatarios.

—Hay otra cosa que oirá con mayor gusto —dijo Arthur—. Vamos a la biblioteca y se lo contaré todo mientras mi abuelo está en la sala con las señoras. Es algo que le sorprenderá —continuó diciendo mientras se sentaban—. Al fin y al cabo mi abuelo ha hecho una cosa buena.

—¿Se trata de Adam?

—Sí. Quería ir a decírselo, señor Irwine, pero no pude por mis muchas ocupaciones. Según ya sabe, había desistido de tratar del asunto con mi abuelo por creer que era inútil; pero ayer por la mañana me hizo llamar antes de que yo saliera y me asombró diciendo que había decidido ya todo lo que convenía hacer, en vista de que el viejo Satchell se vería obligado a dejar de trabajar, y que se proponía confiar a Adam la administración de los bosques, con el salario de una guinea por semana y el uso de un póney mantenido y cuidado aquí. Creo que el secreto está en que debió de comprender que era un buen plan desde el primer momento, pero tuvo que vencer alguna antipatía personal contra Adam, aparte de que basta que yo le proponga una cosa para que él la rechace. En mi abuelo se observan grandes contradicciones. Me consta que quiere dejarme todo el dinero que ha ahorrado, y que incluso dejará una cantidad muy escasa a la pobre tía Lydia, que ha sido su esclava toda la vida, de modo que no le corresponderán más de unas quinientas libras por año, a fin de legarme mayor cantidad a mí; y, sin embargo, algunas veces me odia por el hecho de ser su heredero. Estoy convencido de que si me rompiese el cuello lo consideraría la mayor desgracia que puede ocurrirle, sin embargo parece complacerse en zaherirme y molestarme continuamente.

—¡Ah, hijo mío! No sólo el amor de la mujer es pura ficción. Hay gran cantidad de amor que no ama en el mundo masculino; pero háblame de Adam. ¿Ha aceptado el cargo? No sé si es mucho más provechoso que su trabajo actual, aunque por otra parte le dejará bastante tiempo libre.

—Cuando le hablé de ello, al principio estuvo vacilando largo rato. Objetaba que no se consideraba capaz de dar satisfacción a mi abuelo. Pero yo le rogué que si no tenía alguna otra razón especial que se lo impidiera, aceptase el puesto para hacerme un favor personal y siempre suponiendo que le gustase el cargo y no tuviese que abandonar otra cosa más provechosa. Él me aseguró que prefería ese trabajo a cualquier otro, y que éste constituiría un gran adelanto en sus negocios, pues le permitiría hacer lo que deseaba desde mucho tiempo atrás, o sea dejar de trabajar para Burge. Dijo que tendría tiempo de sobra para ocuparse de sus pequeños negocios, a los que se dedicaría con su hermano Seth, y que quizás podría ir ampliándolos gradualmente. Por fin aceptó, y hoy comerá con los grandes arrendatarios, a quienes me propongo anunciarles su nombramiento y pedirles que beban a la salud de Adam. Será un pequeño drama que representaré en honor de mi amigo. Es un buen muchacho y aprovecho la oportunidad para que todo el mundo sepa la consideración y el aprecio en que le tengo.

—Y es un drama en el que mi amigo Arthur se ha reservado el papel principal —replicó sonriendo el señor Irwine. Pero al ver que Arthur se ruborizaba, continuó—: Mi papel, según ya sabe, es el del viejo Fogy, que no encuentra nada que admirar en los jóvenes… Y ni siquiera admito estar orgulloso de mi alumno cuando hace algo agradable. Aunque, por una vez, tendré que actuar de amable y anciano caballero y secundar su brindis en honor de Adam. ¿Ha cedido también su abuelo acerca del otro punto, o sea consintiendo en tener a un hombre respetable como mayordomo?

—¡Oh, no! —Arthur abandonó el sillón impacientemente y se puso a pasear por la estancia con las manos en los bolsillos—. Creo que tiene algún proyecto acerca del arrendamiento de la granja del cazadero y pretende regatear la provisión de leche y manteca para la casa. Pero yo no le hago preguntas, porque eso me irrita demasiado. Creo que se propone tratar todos los asuntos personalmente y no tomar ningún mayordomo. De todos modos es admirable su energía.

—Vayamos con las señoras —dijo el señor Irwine levantándose a su vez—. Quiero decir a mi madre que usted le ha dispuesto un magnífico trono bajo la carpa.

—Sí. Y además hemos de ir a comer —dijo Arthur—. Deben de ser las dos, porque ya oigo la campanilla que llama a los arrendatarios.

XXIII

La comida

En cuanto Adam se enteró de que comería arriba en compañía de los grandes arrendatarios, se sintió molesto al verse realzado con respecto a su madre y Seth, que habían de comer en los claustros de la planta baja. Pero el mayordomo señor Mills le aseguró que el capitán Donnithorne había dado órdenes especiales acerca de ello y que se enfadaría mucho si Adam no ocupaba el sitio señalado.

El joven se conformó y fue en busca de Seth, que se hallaba a pocos metros de distancia.

—Oye, Seth —le dijo—, el capitán me manda decir que quiere que coma arriba, y, según asegura el señor Mills, está empeñado; quizás haría mal en rehusar. Pero no me gusta la idea de ocupar un lugar más importante que tú y que nuestra madre, como si yo fuese mejor que los de mi propia sangre. Espero que no te enfadarás.

—De ningún modo, muchacho —replicó Seth—. Tu honor es nuestro honor y si has merecido mayor respeto, a ti mismo te lo debes. Cuanto más alto te vea sobre mí, mejor, siempre y cuando sigas demostrándome un cariño fraternal. El cambio se debe a que has sido nombrado administrador de los bosques, y no me parece mal. Es un puesto de confianza, y ahora estás muy por encima de los obreros.

—Sí —replicó Adam—. Pero todavía nadie sabe nada de este asunto. Yo no he comunicado aún al señor Burge que voy a dejar su casa, y no me gustaría decírselo a nadie antes de que él lo sepa, porque no hay duda de que se resentiría. A la gente la extrañará verme allí y creo que adivinarán la razón y empezarán a preguntarse unos a otros; sé que desde hace tres semanas no se habla de otra cosa.

—Bueno, tú puedes decir que has recibido la orden de ir arriba pero que no te han explicado la causa. Es la verdad, y en cuanto a nuestra madre, se alegrará mucho. Vamos a decírselo.

Adam no era el único invitado a comer arriba por razones distintas de la cantidad con que contribuía a las rentas del propietario. Había otras personas de ambas parroquias, respetables por sus funciones más que por su dinero, y entre ellas estaba Barde Massey. Su cojera era más acusada que nunca en aquel día caluroso; Adam se quedó atrás cuando sonó la campana llamando a comer para acompañar a su viejo amigo, pues además le intimidaba reunirse con el grupo de los Poyser en aquella fiesta tan sonada. Ya se presentaría alguna oportunidad de acercarse a Hetty durante el día; Adam se contentaba con eso, pues no quería arriesgarse a ser el blanco de las bromas a costa de la joven y él, y es que aquel enorme muchacho, franco y valiente, era muy tímido y desconfiado con respecto a sus amores.

—Hola, maestro Massey —dijo Adam al reunirse con Barde—. Yo también comeré arriba con usted; el capitán me lo ha ordenado.

—¡Ah! —dijo Barde deteniéndose y apoyando una mano en la espalda del joven—. En tal caso es que hay algo. ¿Te has enterado de lo que quiere hacer el caballero?

—Sí, señor. Puedo decirle lo que sé, porque me consta que guardará silencio si se lo ruego, y también estoy persuadido de que no divulgará una palabra hasta que el asunto sea del dominio público, pues tengo grandes razones para desear que no se sepa.

—Confía en mí, muchacho, confía en mí. Ya sabes que no tengo ninguna mujer que me quiera sonsacar para luego divulgarlo a los cuatro vientos. Si alguna vez te confías a un hombre, procura que sea soltero.

—Pues bien, ayer se decidió que yo me encargue de administrar los bosques. El capitán me llamó para ofrecerme el cargo mientras yo dirigía la instalación de los postes y de las carpas. Y acepté. Pero si alguien le pregunta algo arriba, finja que no sabe nada y desvíe la conversación. Se lo agradeceré mucho. Y ahora, vamos, pues sin duda seremos los últimos.

—No temas, sé lo que debo hacer —dijo Bartle avanzando al mismo tiempo—. Esta noticia será la salsa que sazonará mi comida.

Muy bien, muchacho; llegarás a ser alguien. Por mi parte, no tendría inconveniente en ponerte frente a cualquiera para medir y calcular. Has recibido una buena instrucción. Sí, sin duda alguna.

En cuanto estuvieron arriba, la cuestión que Arthur había dejado sin resolver relativa a quién sería presidente y quién vicepresidente, estaba aún discutiéndose, de manera que la entrada de Adam pasó inadvertida.

—Lo mejor es —decía el señor Casson— que puesto que el viejo señor Poyser es el más anciano de la sala, se siente a la cabecera de la mesa. No en vano fui mayordomo durante quince años; puedo aseguraros que aprendí cuáles son las cosas correctas y cuáles no en una comida.

—Nada de eso —decía el viejo Martin—. Yo lo he dejado todo en manos de mi hijo y ahora no soy arrendatario. Dejen que mi hijo ocupe la cabecera. Los viejos ya hemos tenido muchas oportunidades y ahora hay que dejar paso a los jóvenes.

—Yo creía que el arrendatario más importante sería el que tuviese más tierras y no el más viejo —observó Luke Brilton, que no sentía ninguna simpatía por el crítico señor Poyser—. Aquí tenemos al señor Holdsworth, que posee mayor extensión de tierra arrendada que otro cualquiera de la propiedad.

—Bueno —dijo el señor Poyser—. Supongamos que se sienta en la cabecera el que tenga las tierras peor cuidadas. Quien adquiera semejante honor no será envidiado seguramente.

—Aquí viene el maestro Massey —dijo el señor Craig, quien, como es natural, sólo quería tener la fiesta en paz—. El maestro de escuela nos dirá qué debemos hacer. ¿Quién debe sentarse a la cabecera, señor Massey?

—El más corpulento —replicó Bartle—. Y así no molestará a su vecino. Y el que le siga en corpulencia se sentará frente a él.

Este modo original de zanjar la disputa originó grandes carcajadas, aunque para ello habría bastado cualquier respuesta menos graciosa. El señor Casson, sin embargo, no consideró que esa solución fuese incompatible con su dignidad y con su conocimiento superior, así que tomó parte en las carcajadas hasta que se dio cuenta de que era el segundo en corpulencia. Martin Poyser hijo era el más corpulento; a él le correspondía presidir la mesa, y el señor Casson, que le seguía en peso, quedaba nombrado vicepresidente.

A causa de este arreglo, Adam, que lógicamente estaba en el extremo de la mesa, fue blanco de la observación inmediata del señor Casson, quien, ocupadísimo con el debate, no se había fijado en su entrada. Según ya sabemos, el señor Casson consideraba a Adam un poco ambicioso y entrometido, y opinaba que los señores hacían a aquel carpintero más caso de lo que convenía, porque apenas se ocupaban del señor Casson, quien, por espacio de quince años, había sido un mayordomo excelente.

—¡Vaya, señor Bede! Usted es de los que suben deprisa —dijo al ver que Adam se sentaba—. Creo recordar que nunca había comido aquí.

—No, señor Casson —contestó Adam con una voz tan fuerte que pudo oírse en toda la mesa—. Nunca había comido aquí; pero he venido por expreso deseo del capitán Donnithorne, y espero que no moleste a nadie.

—Nada de eso —contestaron varias voces a coro—. Al contrario, nos alegramos mucho de que haya venido. ¿Hay alguien que diga lo contrario?

—Cuando acabemos de comer nos cantará «Muy lejos y sobre las montañas», ¿verdad? —dijo el señor Chowne—. Me gusta mucho esa canción.

—¡Bah! No tiene comparación con las canciones escocesas —dijo el señor Craig—. Por mi parte nunca he cantado, pues siempre he tenido otras cosas más importantes que hacer. A un hombre que tiene la cabeza llena de los nombres y la naturaleza de las plantas no le queda sitio para recordar canciones. Pero yo tenía un primo segundo que tenía mucha facilidad en recordar canciones escocesas. También es verdad que no pensaba en nada más.

—¡Las canciones escocesas! —exclamó Massey con enorme desdén—. Estoy hasta las narices de ellas. No sirven más que para asustar a los pájaros, es decir, a los pájaros ingleses, porque los escoceses pueden cantar en escocés si les da la gana. Dad gaitas a los muchachos en vez de carracas, y os aseguro que no habrá ave que tenga ganas de comerse el trigo.

—Hay personas que encuentran un placer muy grande en criticar lo que no conocen —dijo el señor Craig.

—¡Bah! Las canciones escocesas se parecen mucho a una mujer vocinglera y fastidiosa —continuó diciendo Barde sin prestar atención a las palabras del señor Craig—; repiten el mismo tema innumerables veces y nunca llegan a un final razonable. Cualquiera podría creer que las canciones escocesas dirigen una

pregunta a alguien tan sordo como el tío Taft y que jamás obtienen respuesta.

A Adam no le importaba gran cosa sentarse al lado del señor Casson, pues desde su sitio podía ver a Hetty, que se sentaba no muy lejos de él en la mesa de al lado. La joven, sin embargo, ni siquiera había notado su presencia; toda su rabiosa atención estaba concentrada en Totty, quien insistía en poner los pies sobre el banco, con lo cual amenazaba manchar de polvo el traje blanco y rosa de Hetty. Apenas las gordezuelas piernas de la niña habían sido obligadas a quedar colgantes, volvían a subir, pues Totty estaba demasiado ocupada contemplando las grandes bandejas en busca del *plum-pudding* para que se fijara siquiera en lo que hacían sus piernas. Hetty, agotada ya la paciencia, frunció las cejas, contuvo las lágrimas y dijo:

—¡Oh, querida tía! Hazme el favor de reñir a Totty; no hace más que levantar las piernas y ensuciarme el traje.

—¿Qué tienes que decir de la niña? Nunca estás contenta con ella —replicó la madre—. Déjala que venga a mi lado y yo cuidaré de ella.

Adam no pudo menos que observar la expresión de malhumor de Hetty; sus grandes ojos parecían aumentar de tamaño por las lágrimas que estaban a punto de derramar. La apacible Mary Burge, que estaba sentada lo bastante cerca para observar la contrariedad de Hetty, así como también que Adam tenía los ojos fijos en ella, creyó que un muchacho tan juicioso como ése debía de tener en cuenta el escaso valor de la belleza de una mujer cuyo carácter era tan malo. Mary era una buena muchacha que jamás se dejaba arrastrar por los malos sentimientos, pero en ese momento se dijo que puesto que Hetty tenía mal carácter, convenía que Adam se enterase. Y si Hetty hubiera sido una muchacha vulgar, en aquel momento habría parecido fea y desagradable, así que cualquier juicio moral que se hiciese sobre ella habría sido seguramente exacto. Pero aun en su enfado había algo encantador, y aquella explosión de malhumor parecía más un disgusto infantil que un enfado de persona mayor, de modo que el severo Adam no sintió ningún movimiento de desaprobación, sino una compasión risueña, como si hubiese visto a un gatito encorvar la espalda o a un pajarillo con el plumaje erizado. No podía comprender la razón de su disgusto y lo único que se decía era que aquella jovencita era la más hermosa del mundo, y que si él podía evitarlo nada volvería a disgustarla nunca más. En cuanto Totty se fue de su lado, Hetty sorprendió la mirada de Adam y le dirigió una resplandeciente sonrisa, saludando con un movimiento de cabeza. Aquello era lo más parecido a un flirteo; Hetty sabía muy bien que Mary Burge estaba mirándolos. Pero aquella sonrisa fue como un trago de vino para Adam.

XXIV

El brindis

Cuando la comida terminó y sirvieron las primeras jarras de la cerveza procedente del gran barril del año del natalicio, se hizo sitio para el grueso señor Poyser a un lado de la mesa y pusieron dos sillas en la cabecera. Se había convenido ya exactamente lo que haría el señor Poyser en cuanto apareciese el joven caballero, y durante los últimos cinco minutos aquél había estado muy abstraído, con los ojos fijos en el oscuro cuadro que tenía delante, mientras revolvía las monedas sueltas y otros objetos en los bolsillos del pantalón.

Cuando entró el joven caballero acompañado por el señor Irwine, todos se pusieron en pie; aquel homenaje resultó muy agradable para Arthur, a quien le gustaba sentir su propia importancia y además apreciaba mucho la simpatía de aquella gente; necesitaba persuadirse de que todos le tenían consideración y afecto. Su rostro era fiel reflejo del placer que experimentaba cuando dijo:

—Mi abuelo y yo esperamos que nuestros amigos presentes hayan comido bien y que les haya gustado la cerveza del año de mi nacimiento. El señor Irwine y yo hemos venido a probarla con vosotros, y estoy seguro de que a todos les parecerá muy bien que el rector nos acompañe en estos momentos.

Todos los ojos se volvieron entonces hacia el señor Poyser que, con las manos aún hurgando en los bolsillos, empezó con la decisión propia de un reloj que da lentamente las campanadas:

—Capitán, hoy mis vecinos me han encargado hablar en su nombre, porque cuando la gente piensa del mismo modo, con uno solo que hable basta. Y aunque quizás hemos sido de distintas opiniones sobre muchas cosas, ya que a un hombre le gusta mover la mano de un modo y a su vecino de una manera diferente (y no se crea que con eso quiero hablar de los trabajos agrícolas de los demás), en lo que diré estoy seguro de que todos somos del mismo parecer con respecto a nuestro señor. Todos nosotros le conocimos cuando era pequeño y jamás hemos sabido de usted cosa alguna que no fuese buena y honorable. Habla y obra bien y nos alegra mucho pensar que llegará un día en que será nuestro señor, porque estamos seguros de que hará bien a todo el mundo y de que si puede evitarlo ningún hombre comerá el pan amargo. Eso es lo que quería decir y también lo que querían decir todos. Y cuando un hombre ha dicho lo que quería, lo mejor es que se calle, porque la cerveza no mejora mientras está en la jarra en espera de ser bebida. Y no voy a decir qué nos ha parecido la cerveza, porque no hemos querido beberla sin brindar antes a su salud. La comida ha sido excelente y si a alguien no le ha gustado es su problema. En cuanto a la presencia del señor rector, de sobra sabe él que en todas partes se le recibe lo mejor que se puede; y espero y esperamos todos que vivirá lo bastante para vernos envejecer a todos y a nuestros hijos convertidos en hombres y mujeres, así como a su señoría en padre de familia. Y no tengo nada más que decir con respecto a este día; bebamos, pues, a la salud de nuestro joven señor, y lancemos tres hurras.

Inmediatamente empezaron los gritos, el ruido de vasos, las exclamaciones repetidas; éstas resultan más agradables que la música más sublime a los oídos de quien recibe este tributo por primera vez. Arthur sintió un remordimiento mientras oía el discurso del señor Poyser, pero fue demasiado débil para anular el placer que sentía al oír tantos elogios. ¿Acaso no merecía en conjunto lo que acababan de decir de él? Tal vez había algo en su conducta que a Poyser no le habría gustado si lo hubiera sabido…, pues conviene tener en cuenta que ningún hombre, por justo que sea, puede resistir sin temor una inspección severa. Aunque Poyser, por otra parte, no debía de saberlo porque, en resumidas cuentas, ¿qué había hecho él? Quizás ir demasiado lejos en un flirteo, pero otro hombre, en su lugar, habría actuado mucho peor. No pasaría nada

malo, no podía ocurrir ninguna desgracia, porque en cuanto volviese a verse a solas con Hetty le diría que no debía pensar en serio en él o en cuanto había ocurrido. Ya comprenderá el lector que Arthur necesitaba sentirse satisfecho de sí mismo. Las ideas desagradables debían desaparecer para dejar sitio a sus buenas intenciones para el futuro, y pudo formar éstas con tanta rapidez que tuvo tiempo de sentirse inquieto y tranquilizarse antes de que el señor Poyser terminase su lento brindis y, cuando llegó la ocasión de contestar, en conjunto se sentía ya con el corazón libre de cualquier temor.

—Os doy las gracias a todos, mis queridos amigos y vecinos —dijo Arthur—, por la buena opinión que tenéis de mí y los buenos deseos que me ha expresado el señor Poyser en su nombre y en el vuestro; os aseguro que mi mayor deseo consistirá en merecerlos. En el curso natural de las cosas podemos esperar que, si vivo lo suficiente, un día u otro llegaré a ser vuestro señor, y en realidad, precisamente basándose en esta esperanza, mi abuelo ha deseado que celebrase este día para presentarme ante vosotros; y espero alcanzar esta posición no sólo para gozar del poder y de los placeres, sino como un medio de beneficiar a mis vecinos. Un hombre tan joven como yo no debería hablaros de labores agrícolas, puesto que me aventajáis por edad y por experiencia. Sin embargo, estos asuntos me han inspirado siempre gran interés y he procurado aprender cuanto me ha sido posible. Y en cuanto el curso de los acontecimientos ponga la propiedad en mis manos, mi primer deseo será dar a mis arrendatarios todo el aliento y todo el auxilio que puede proporcionarles un propietario, mejorando sus tierras y esforzándome en favorecer su economía doméstica. Desearé que mis buenos arrendatarios me consideren su mejor amigo y nada me hará tan feliz como respetar a todos los hombres de la propiedad y ser respetado, a mi vez, por ellos. No es hora de entrar en detalles, y así, me limito a corresponder a vuestros buenos deseos diciéndoos que mis propias esperanzas coinciden con ellos; que quiero realizar lo que esperáis de mí y que soy de la opinión del señor Poyser acerca de que cuando un hombre ha dicho lo que quería debe callarse; mas el placer que experimento ante vuestro brindis no sería perfecto si no bebiésemos también a la salud de mi abuelo, que para mí ha sido padre y madre a la vez. Y no diré más hasta que conmigo hayáis bebido a su salud en un día en que, por su deseo, me presento ante vosotros como representante futuro de su nombre y de su familia.

Tal vez ninguno de los presentes, a excepción del señor Irwine, comprendió por completo y dio su aprobación al gracioso modo con que Arthur propuso un brindis a la salud de su abuelo. Los granjeros creían que el joven caballero conocía de sobra el odio que sentían por el viejo propietario, y la señora Poyser dijo «que era mejor no menearlo». Los rústicos labriegos no comprenden con facilidad los refinamientos del buen gusto, pero no podían negarse a aquel brindis, y en cuanto todos hubieron bebido, Arthur añadió:

—Os doy las gracias, tanto en nombre de mi abuelo como en el mío propio. Y ahora quiero deciros otra cosa, porque deseo que compartáis el placer que eso me causa y espero que opinaréis lo mismo que yo. Estoy seguro de que ninguno de los que estamos aquí deja de tener una alta opinión de mi amigo Adam Bede. En toda esta vecindad es sabido que no existe otro hombre en cuya palabra se pueda confiar más que en la suya; que, cuando emprende algo, lo hace bien y cuida tanto de los intereses de quien le emplea como si fuesen suyos propios. Y me enorgullece decir que me encariñé con Adam en mi infancia y que nunca he olvidado mi amistad hacia él. Eso demuestra que sé reconocer a los hombres honrados. Durante largo tiempo deseé que se le confiara la administración de los bosques de la propiedad, que son muy valiosos. Y eso no sólo por la alta opinión que me merece su carácter, sino también porque posee los conocimientos y la habilidad que le hacen digno de tal puesto. Me complazco en deciros que es deseo de mi abuelo, y que ya está decidido, que Adam administre los bosques; este cambio, estoy seguro, resultará beneficioso para la propiedad. Y espero que ahora todos vosotros os uniréis a mí para beber a su salud, deseándole para esta vida todas las prosperidades que se merece.

»Pero aún hay otro amigo mío, más antiguo que Adam Bede, aquí presente, y no necesito deciros que es el señor Irwine. Estoy persuadido de que, como yo, opinaréis que no podemos beber a la salud de nadie sin haberlo hecho antes por la suya. Me consta que todos vosotros tenéis razones para quererle, pero ninguno de sus feligreses las tiene en tal número y de tal calidad como yo. Por consiguiente, llenad los vasos y bebamos por nuestro excelente rector. ¡Tres veces hurra!

Este brindis fue acogido con el entusiasmo que faltó en el anterior, y sin duda el momento más pintoresco fue cuando el señor Irwine se levantó para hablar y se volvieron a él los rostros de todos. La superior elegancia de sus facciones era más notable que la de Arthur por contraste con las de los que le rodeaban. Arthur tenía un semblante típicamente inglés y más común, y su traje resplandeciente y a la última moda estaba más cerca del gusto de un joven granjero que del señor Irwine, que se empolvaba los cabellos y vestía traje negro, algo desgastado pero muy limpio, y que, al parecer, era el de las grandes solemnidades, pues aquel hombre tenía el misterioso secreto de no llevar nunca un traje que pareciese

nuevo.

—No es la primera vez, ni mucho menos —dijo—, que he dado las gracias a mis feligreses por sus muestras de bondad y aprecio; pero la afabilidad entre vecinos figura entre las cosas más preciosas que pueden obtener los ancianos. En realidad, nuestra reunión de hoy es una prueba de que cuando lo bueno llega a la mayoría de edad y, al parecer, tiene larga vida por delante, hay razón para alegrarse; y la relación entre nosotros como clérigo y feligreses llegó a su mayoría de edad hace dos años, porque se han cumplido ya veintitrés desde que vine a vivir entre vosotros, y aquí veo a algún hombre alto y de agradable aspecto, y a algunas muchachas lozanas que no me miraron tan afectuosamente cuando las bauticé. Pero estoy seguro de que no os extrañará el hecho de que entre todos esos hombres jóvenes, el que mayor interés me inspira es el señor Arthur Donnithorne, a quien acabáis de expresar vuestros buenos deseos. Durante varios años tuve él placer de ser su profesor y, como es natural, gocé de más frecuentes oportunidades de conocerle de un modo íntimo que cualquiera de los presentes; y tengo cierto orgullo, así como siento un gran placer, al aseguraos que comparto vuestras esperanzas con respecto a él y vuestra confianza en su posesión de las cualidades que han de hacerle un excelente propietario en cuanto le llegue el tiempo de ocupar tan importante puesto entre vosotros. Tenemos iguales ideas acerca de los mismos asuntos; ya veis cómo un hombre que está próximo a los cincuenta puede coincidir con un joven de veintiún años, el cual acaba de expresar unos sentimientos que comparto con todo mi corazón; no quiero, por lo tanto, perder la ocasión de manifestarlo. Y este sentimiento es su alta consideración y su respeto por Adam Bede. Como es sabido, todo el mundo se ocupa más de las personas que gozan de una posición elevada, y sus virtudes son más alabadas que las de aquellos cuya vida transcurre en un ambiente humilde; mas todo hombre de buen sentido sabe la importancia que tienen estos trabajos y estas vidas humildes y qué buenos son los resultados cuando cada una de ellas realiza debidamente su trabajo. Y estoy conforme con mi amigo, el señor Arthur Donnithorne, en creer que cuando un hombre entregado a estos trabajos modestos demuestra tener un carácter que le haría ejemplar en cualquier situación que ocupase, es preciso reconocer su mérito. Es uno de aquellos hombres a quienes hay que honrar y sus amigos deberían estar complacidos. Conozco bien a Adam Bede, me consta que es buen obrero, así como un hijo y un hermano excelente, y enuncio una verdad sencillísima al decir que le respeto cuanto puedo respetar a un hombre. Pero no os hablo de ningún desconocido. Algunos de vosotros sois sus íntimos amigos y creo que no hay aquí quien no le conozca bastante para no brindar con gusto a su salud.

En cuanto se interrumpió el señor Irwine se levantó Arthur y, llenando su vaso, dijo:

—¡Bebamos por Adam Bede y que viva lo suficiente para tener hijos tan fieles y tan inteligentes como él mismo!

Ninguno de los oyentes, ni siquiera Barde Massey, se entusiasmó tanto como el señor Poyser al oír este brindis. Aun cuando le había costado lo indecible pronunciar su discurso, habría empezado otro si no hubiese comprendido la inconveniencia de semejante iniciativa; de todos modos exteriorizó sus sentimientos bebiendo la cerveza con desacostumbrada rapidez y dejando caer el vaso sobre la mesa con fuerza. Si Jonathan Burge y otros experimentaron algún disgusto, se esforzaron en aparentar satisfacción; el brindis fue, al parecer, unánime y cordial.

Adam estaba más pálido que de costumbre cuando se levantó para dar las gracias a sus amigos. Aquel tributo público le había conmovido, cosa muy natural puesto que se hallaba en presencia de todo su pequeño mundo, unido en aquellos momentos para honrarle. No sentía ninguna timidez ante la necesidad de hablar, ni tampoco le turbaba la vanidad ni la falta de palabras. Se puso en pie y permaneció erguido como de costumbre, con la cabeza algo echada hacia atrás y las manos inmóviles, dando muestras de la ruda dignidad peculiar de los obreros inteligentes, honrados y bien constituidos, que nunca se preocupan de saber cuál es su papel en el mundo.

—Me ha cogido por sorpresa —dijo—. No esperaba nada semejante, y esto excede en mucho mis más optimistas expectativas. Pero tengo grandes razones para estarle agradecido, capitán, y a usted también, señor Irwine, así como a todos mis amigos presentes, por haber bebido a mi salud, deseándome toda clase de bienes. Sería una tontería decir que no merezco la opinión que tenéis de mí. Agradecería muy mal vuestra bondad si dijese que me conocéis desde hace años y que todavía no sabéis nada de mí. Todos sabéis perfectamente que si me encargo de un trabajo lo hago a conciencia, tanto si me lo pagan bien como si no. Me avergonzaría de permanecer ante vosotros si no fuese verdad. Pero creo que es lo que un hombre debe hacer y por lo tanto no hay que jactarse de ello. Por esta razón estoy convencido de que nunca he hecho otra cosa sino cumplir con mi deber; y hagamos lo que hagamos, siempre haremos uso del espíritu y de las facultades que nos han sido otorgadas. Y así vuestra bondad no es ninguna deuda hacia mí, sino un don gratuito, y por esta razón lo acepto y os lo agradezco. En cuanto a este nuevo empleo que he aceptado os

diré que no he hecho más que conformarme con los deseos del capitán Donnithorne y que me esforzaré en cumplir sus expectativas. Nada me contentará más que trabajar a sus órdenes y el saber que, al mismo tiempo que me gano el pan, cuido de sus intereses. Creo que es uno de los caballeros que desean obrar bien y dejar el mundo algo mejor de como lo encontraron; opino que todo el mundo debería intentar lo mismo, tanto si es noble como si pertenece al pueblo, y tanto si proporciona el dinero necesario para emprender una obra importante como si ejecuta el trabajo con sus propias manos. No es éste el momento de hablaros más de lo que siento por él, pues espero demostrarlo con mis actos el resto de mi vida.

Hubo diversidad de opiniones acerca del discurso de Adam; algunas mujeres murmuraron que no se había mostrado lo bastante agradecido y que había hablado con mucho orgullo; pero la mayor parte de los hombres dijeron que nadie habría sido capaz de hablar con más entereza y que Adam era un excelente muchacho. Mientras se cruzaban tales observaciones y se preguntaban mutuamente qué haría el viejo caballero con el mayordomo y si por fin contrataría a un administrador, se levantaron los dos caballeros y fueron hacia la mesa de las mujeres y los niños. Allí, por supuesto, no se había servido cerveza fuerte, sino los postres, vino dulce de grosellas para los niños y excelente jerez para las mujeres. La señora Poyser ocupaba la presidencia de la mesa y Totty se sentaba en su regazo, metiendo su naricita en un vaso de vino en busca de las nueces que flotaban en él.

—¿Cómo está, señora Poyser? —preguntó Arthur—. Supongo que habrá disfrutado del estupendo brindis de su esposo.

—¡Oh, señor! Los hombres tienen la lengua muy torpe y casi es preciso adivinar lo que quieren decir, como con los niños que empiezan a hablar.

—¿Cómo? ¿Acaso cree que usted habría hablado mejor en su lugar, señora Poyser? —preguntó riéndose el señor Irwine.

—Gracias a Dios, señor, cuando quiero decir algo encuentro las palabras apropiadas, y no por eso censuro a mi marido, porque si bien es hombre de pocas palabras, sostiene lo que dice.

—Con toda seguridad nunca he visto reunión más agradable que la de hoy —observó Arthur mirando a su alrededor a los niños de mejillas sonrosadas—. Mi tía y la señorita Irwine subirán a veros dentro de un rato. Temían el ruido de los brindis, pero sería una vergüenza que no os viesen sentados a la mesa.

Arthur continuó hablando con las madres y acariciando a los niños, mientras que el señor Irwine se limitaba a saludar a distancia para que nadie apartase su atención del joven caballero que era el héroe de aquel día. Arthur no se atrevió a detenerse cerca de Hetty y se limitó a saludarla con un movimiento de cabeza al pasar frente a ella. Aquella tonta sintió que su corazón se llenaba de descontento, porque ¿qué mujer queda satisfecha ante un desdén fingido, aun cuando sepa que es la máscara del amor? Hetty pensó que pasaría un día de lo más desagradable; por un momento la luz de la verdad iluminó sus sueños. El mismo Arthur que pocas horas antes le había parecido tan cercano, estaba entonces muy lejos, igual que el héroe de una gran procesión queda separado de un insignificante espectador confundido entre la multitud.

XXV

Los juegos

El gran baile no debía empezar hasta las ocho de la noche, aunque para los jóvenes y las muchachas que quisieran bailar en el sombreado césped no faltaba la música en ningún momento. ¿Acaso la banda del Club Benéfico no era capaz de tocar jigas, contradanzas y bailes en general? Además había una gran banda contratada en Rosseter, que gracias a sus maravillosos instrumentos de viento y a lo mucho que los músicos hinchaban las mejillas, constituía una diversión extraordinaria para los niños y las niñas. Sin hablar del violín de Joshua Rann, que con generosa previsión había traído consigo su instrumento para el caso de que alguien tuviese el buen gusto de preferir un baile ejecutado por él solo.

Mientras tanto, cuando el sol abandonó el espacio descubierto frente a la casa, empezaron los juegos. Había por supuesto cucañas bien enjabonadas, para que los jóvenes y los muchachos se encaramasen por ellas, carreras de viejas, carreras de sacos, pesos para que los levantasen los hombres fornidos, y una larga lista de pruebas como, por ejemplo, recorrer el mayor número de metros posible saltando sobre un solo pie; en todos aquellos ejercicios Wiry Ben resultó ser el más hábil de toda la comarca. Y como fin de fiesta había una carrera de burros, la más sublime de todas las carreras, basada en la gran idea socialista de que todos hicieran correr a sus respectivos animales para dar el premio al asno que corriese menos.

Poco después de las cuatro, la magnífica y anciana señora Irwine, vestida con su traje de damasco adornado con encajes y joyas, apareció acompañada por Arthur y seguida por toda la familia de la mansión para ocupar el sillón elevado que se había dispuesto bajo la carpa de tela a rayas y desde donde iba a entregar los premios a los vencedores. La tristona y severa señorita Lydia había solicitado designar tan regio cometido a aquella anciana y majestuosa señora, y Arthur aprovechó esta oportunidad para satisfacer la afición de su madrina a representar papeles distinguidos. El viejo señor Donnithorne, limpio, perfumado y arrugado, acompañó a la señora Irwine con su ácida y meticulosa cortesía. El señor Gawaine dio el brazo a la señorita Lydia, que vestía un traje muy elegante de seda de color rosado; y la pálida Anne Irwine pasó en último lugar, conducida por su hermano. No había sido invitado ningún amigo de la familia, aparte del señor Gawaine. Al día siguiente se celebraría una gran comida para los notables de la región, pero aquel día se necesitaban todas las fuerzas para divertir a los arrendatarios.

En frente de la carpa había una zanja que dividía el prado del parque, pero se tendió un puente para dejar paso a los vencedores, y los grupos de invitados permanecieron en pie, sentados en bancos o repartidos a ambos lados del espacio libre, desde las carpas blancas hasta la zanja.

—La verdad es que es un bonito espectáculo —dijo la anciana señora con su voz profunda en cuanto estuvo sentada, y contempló la brillante escena que destacaba sobre un fondo verde oscuro—. Es muy probable que ésta sea la última fiesta a la que vaya, a no ser que te apresures a casarte, Arthur. Pero cuida de conquistar a una esposa encantadora, porque de lo contrario me moriré sin verla.

—Es usted muy exigente, madrina —dijo Arthur—, y estoy seguro de que mi elección no la contentará.

—No te perdonaré si no es bonita y no admitiré como excusa el hecho de que sea una muchacha buena, porque éste es el argumento que se aduce siempre con una persona vulgar. Tampoco ha de ser tonta, porque necesitarás que te dirija a ti y eso no podría hacerlo ninguna mujer estúpida. Oye, Dauphin, ¿quién es ese muchacho alto de rostro tan bondadoso? Ese que va con la cabeza descubierta y que parece cuidar mucho de aquella mujer alta que tiene al lado. Sin duda es su madre. Esto es evidente.

—¿No lo conoce, madre? —preguntó el señor Irwine—. Es Seth Bede, el hermano de Adam. Un metodista, pero muy buen muchacho. El pobre Seth ha pasado una mala temporada, creo que a causa de la

desgraciada muerte de su padre; además Joshua Rann me ha dicho que quería casarse con aquella hermosa predicadora metodista que estaba aquí hace un mes, y supongo que ella lo rechazó.

—Recuerdo haber oído hablar de esa joven. Pero aquí hay muchas personas desconocidas para mí; han crecido tanto desde los tiempos en que las trataba.

—¡Qué vista tan excelente tiene! —exclamó el anciano señor Donnithorne, que sostenía ante sus ojos un binóculo—. No comprendo cómo puede ver a tanta distancia la expresión del rostro de ese joven. Para mí no es más que una mancha confusa. En cambio seguro que la aventajo cuando haya que mirar de cerca, pues soy capaz de leer sin lentes los caracteres impresos más pequeños.

—¡Ah, mi querido señor! Usted empezó siendo muy miope y los que tienen ese defecto conservan mejor la vista. Yo, en cambio, para leer necesito cristales muy gruesos, aunque mis ojos ven con toda perfección las cosas distantes. Si pudiese vivir cincuenta años más, llegaría a ser ciega para todo aquello que no estuviese fuera del alcance de la vista de los demás, igual que un hombre que está dentro de un pozo y que no puede ver otra cosa que las estrellas.

—Mirad —dijo Arthur—, todas las viejas están ya dispuestas a emprender la carrera—. ¿Por quién apuesta usted, Gawaine?

—Por esa de largas piernas, aunque quizá obtenga la victoria esa otra que parece hecha de alambres.

—Hacia la derecha están los Poyser y no muy lejos —dijo la señorita Irwine—. La señora Poyser le está mirando ahora. Demuéstrele que la ha visto.

—Con mucho gusto —dijo la anciana dama saludando muy amable a la señora Poyser—. Una mujer que me obsequia con tan excelentes quesos, es merecedora de mis atenciones. ¡Dios mío, qué criatura tan gorda tiene en las rodillas! ¿Y quién es esa hermosa muchacha de ojos negros?

—Hetty Sorrel —contestó la señorita Lydia Donnithorne—. Es sobrina de Martin Poyser; una muchacha muy joven y bien parecida. Mi doncella le ha enseñado algunas labores de aguja y últimamente remendó unos encajes míos de un modo muy aceptable.

—Hace ya seis o siete años que vive con los Poyser, madre. Sin duda la ha visto alguna vez —observó la señorita Irwine.

—No, aún no la conocía, hija. Por lo menos como es ahora —dijo la señora Irwine sin dejar de mirar a Hetty—. Es muy guapa. Una belleza perfecta. Desde mi juventud no había visto a una joven tan hermosa. ¡Qué lástima que esa belleza deba ser entregada a los granjeros, cuando tan necesaria sería en una buena familia sin fortuna! En cambio, la pobre se casará con un hombre que no la considerará más hermosa que si tuviese los ojos redondos y el pelo rojo.

Arthur no se atrevió a volver los ojos hacia Hetty mientras hablaba de ella la señora Irwine. Fingió no oír nada y estar ocupado en algo en el otro lado. Pero veía muy bien, aun sin mirar; al oír cómo alababan su belleza, vio a la joven más bella que nunca, porque la opinión de otras personas era el aire en el que mejor crecían los sentimientos de Arthur. Sí. Aquella muchacha era capaz de hacer perder la cabeza a cualquier hombre, y cualquier otro que se hubiera encontrado en su lugar habría sentido lo mismo que él. De este modo, estar dispuesto a dejarla, como había decidido, sería un acto que siempre recordaría con orgullo.

—No, madre —dijo el señor Irwine contestando a sus palabras—. En eso no estoy conforme con usted. La gente del pueblo no es tan tonta como se figura. El hombre más vulgar, si posee un gramo de buen sentido y de sentimientos, advierte muy bien la diferencia que existe entre una mujer delicada y otra ordinaria. Incluso un perro distingue esa diferencia. Tal vez el hombre no sea capaz de explicar la influencia que esa belleza más refinada ejerce sobre él; pero la siente.

—¡Dios mío! ¡Dauphin! ¿Cómo puede ser que un soltero como tú sepa todas esas cosas?

—Precisamente en estos asuntos los solteros somos más sabios que los casados, porque tenemos más ocasiones de examinar el asunto de un modo general. Así en la crítica de la mujer no influye el hecho de que una de ellas le pertenece. Como ejemplo de lo que digo, aquella hermosa predicadora metodista que mencionaba hace poco, me dijo que había predicado a los más rudos mineros y éstos siempre la trataron con gran respeto y simpatía. La razón es, aunque quizás ella la desconozca, que ella misma posee grandes cantidades de ternura, refinamiento y pureza. Y ni siquiera los individuos más rudos dejan de sentir la influencia distinguida y refinada de semejante mujer.

—Aquí viene una muchachota a recibir el premio —dijo el señor Gawaine—. Debe de haber tomado parte en la carrera de sacos que se ha celebrado antes de nuestra llegada.

Aquella muchachota era nuestra antigua conocida Bessy Cranage, llamada también Bess Chad, cuyas grandes mejillas rojas habían sido objeto de una exageración de color tal que si se tratara de un cuerpo celestial la habría hecho sublime. Bessy, lamento mucho decirlo, se había puesto de nuevo los pendientes tras la marcha de Dinah y se había acicalado con todos los lujos que estaban a su alcance. Cualquiera que

hubiese podido encaminar el corazoncito de Bessy hubiera visto que se parecía mucho al de Hetty en sus esperanzas y en sus ansiedades, aunque quizás la ventaja habría estado del lado de Bess por lo que se refiere a los sentimientos. En cambio no se podía negar que, en apariencia al menos, eran muy distintas. El lector podría verse inclinado a dar un buen tirón de orejas a Bessy, y, en cambio, con gusto hubiese besado las de Hetty.

Bessy se había visto tentada a participar en la difícil carrera, en parte por alegre atrevimiento y en parte para conseguir el premio. Alguien había dicho que los premios consistían en abrigos y otras prendas de ropa excelentes, y cuando se acercó a la tienda abanicándose con el pañuelo, sus ojos redondos brillaban de entusiasmo.

—Aquí está el premio para la primera carrera de sacos —dijo la señorita Lydia tomando un gran paquete de la mesa en la que estaban dispuestos los premios y dándoselo al señor Irwine antes de la llegada de Bessy —. Es una excelente bata de sayal y una pieza de franela.

—Supongo que no se te ocurriría, tía, que la vencedora sería tan joven —observó Arthur—. ¿No podrías encontrar otra cosa para esa muchacha y guardar esa bata horrible para una mujer de más años?

—Yo solamente he comprado cosas útiles y de abrigo —replicó la señorita Lydia mientras arreglaba sus encajes—. No creo conveniente estimular el amor al lujo en las jóvenes de esta clase. Aquí tengo una capa de color rojo, pero es para la vieja que obtenga la victoria.

Este lenguaje en boca de la señorita Lydia hizo asomar una expresión burlona al rostro de la señora Irwine mientras miraba a Arthur; Bessy se acercó y empezó a hacer reverencias.

—Esta niña es Bessy Cranage, madre —dijo el señor Irwine con acento bondadoso—. Es la hija de Chad Cranage. Supongo que recordará a Chad Cranage el herrero.

—Claro que sí —contestó la señora Irwine—. Bien, Bessy; aquí tienes tu premio. Son cosas calientes para este invierno. Estoy segura de que te ha costado mucho alcanzar la victoria en un día tan caluroso.

Cuando Bess vio la horrible bata, que además resultaba demasiado abrigada para aquel día de julio, se le cayó el alma a los pies. Volvió a hacer algunas reverencias sin levantar los ojos, aunque le temblaban las comisuras de la boca, y luego se alejó.

—¡Pobre muchacha! —dijo Arthur—. Ha sufrido una gran decepción. ¡Ojalá tuviésemos algo más de su gusto!

—Parece una muchacha muy atrevida —observó la señorita Lydia—. Por mi parte no tengo ningunas ganas de complacerle.

Arthur decidió en silencio hacer a Bess un regalo en dinero antes de que terminase el día, a fin de que se comprase algo que le gustase más; pero ella, que ignoraba el consuelo de que sería objeto, salió del espacio abierto donde podían verla desde la carpa, y después de arrojar el lío de ropa al pie de un árbol, empezó a llorar entre las risas burlonas de otras muchachas. En esa situación la encontró su discreta prima mayor, que no había perdido el tiempo en acudir a la fiesta después de confiar el niño a su marido.

—¿Qué te pasa? —dijo la matrona Bess tomando el lío y examinándolo—. Seguro que has tomado parte en la carrera y como premio te han dado una excelente ropa de lana que ya podían haber reservado para la gente sensata. Podrías darme un poco de esta tela para hacer vestidos al niño. Sé que lo harás, Bessy, porque eres una buena muchacha.

—Te lo regalo todo —contestó la joven Bessy desdeñosamente y limpiándose las lágrimas.

—Ya que no lo quieres, lo acepto —dijo la desinteresada prima, que se alejó con el lío de ropa para que la muchacha no cambiase de opinión.

Pero aquella joven robusta estaba dotada de una gran elasticidad espiritual que le impedía entregarse por mucho rato al dolor, de modo que en cuanto se dispusieron a celebrar la carrera de burros, su desencanto se desvaneció pensando en la deliciosa excitación que le produciría estimular a aquellos animales con sus silbidos, mientras los muchachos los azuzaban con sus garrotes. Pero ya es sabido que la mente asnal tiene la facultad de adoptar una línea de conducta que se halla en relación inversa de los argumentos utilizados; lo cual, si se piensa, exige un gran vigor mental en tales animalitos; y así, el primer burro demostró una gran inteligencia quedándose clavado en el suelo cuando empezaron a llover los palos sobre su cuerpo, tan contundentes como el granizo. Grandes eran los gritos de la multitud y radiante la sonrisa de Bill Downes, el aserrador de piedra y jinete de aquel magnífico animal, que permanecía tranquilo y con las piernas rígidas en medio de su triunfo.

Arthur, que se había encargado personalmente de comprar los premios para los hombres, hizo feliz a Bill regalándole un magnífico cortaplumas con hojas y accesorios suficientes para ser de utilidad a un hombre que se hallara en una isla desierta. Apenas salió de la tienda llevando el premio en la mano cuando se supo que Wiry Ben proponía divertir a todo el mundo, antes de que los nobles invitados fuesen a cenar, con un

ejercicio improvisado y gratuito, es decir, un baile del que tal vez no le correspondiese la paternidad, pero que ejecutó de un modo tan complicado y original que nadie pudo negarle el aplauso. El orgullo que Wiry Ben sentía por su habilidad como bailarín —habilidad que siempre producía gran efecto en la verbena anual— sólo necesitaba para asomar a la superficie mayor cantidad de buena cerveza. En ese momento estaba convencido de que el noble auditorio se quedaría asombrado al contemplar sus habilidades; además Joshua Rann le alentó aduciendo que convenía hacer algo para complacer al joven caballero y recompensarle de cuanto había hecho por ellos. Y el lector se sorprenderá menos de que tan grave personaje tuviese esa opinión cuando sepa que Ben había rogado al señor Rann que le acompañase con su violín; Joshua tenía la certeza de que aun en el caso de que el baile no fuese notable, ello quedaría muy bien compensado por la música. Adam Bede, que se hallaba en una de las grandes carpas donde se discutía este plan, pidió a Ben que no hiciese tonterías, pero esta observación sirvió para decidir más a Ben, que no quería dejar de hacer algo por la única razón de que Adam Bede no estuviese conforme.

—¿Qué es eso? —observó el viejo señor Donnithorne—. ¿Lo has organizado tú, Arthur? Ahí va el sacristán con su violín y un individuo muy ágil con un ramo de flores en el ojal.

—No —contestó Arthur—; no tengo ni idea. ¡Caramba! ¡Va a bailar! Es uno de los carpinteros… No recuerdo su nombre.

—Es Ben Cranage, y le llaman Wiry Ben —contestó el señor Irwine—. Un individuo algo travieso. Querida Anne, ya veo que estás cansada. Permíteme que te acompañe para que descanses un poco antes de cenar.

La señorita Anne estuvo conforme y se levantó; su buen hermano se la llevó mientras Joshua empezaba a tocar los primeros acordes del aria «La escarapela blanca», desde los que, a través de una serie de transiciones, pensaba poder pasar a una variedad de tonadas ejecutadas con excelente oído y bastante habilidad. Y le habría exasperado mucho saber que la atención general estaba fija en las habilidades coreográficas de Ben y que casi nadie hacía caso de la música.

No sé si el lector habrá visto alguna vez a un campesino inglés ejecutar una danza. Es posible que haya visto bailar a algún artista disfrazado de campesino, que realiza graciosos movimientos con las caderas y la cabeza. Pero eso no es más que una mala imitación. Wiry Ben bailaba muy serio, como si fuese un filósofo que experimenta la cantidad de movimientos raros que pueden ejecutar los miembros humanos.

Para acallar la risotada general que provenía de la carpa a rayas, Arthur aplaudía sin cesar y exclamaba: «¡Bravo!». Pero Ben tenía un admirador cuyos ojos seguían sus movimientos con tanta gravedad como la suya propia al ejecutarlos. Era Martin Poyser, que estaba sentado en un banco con su hijo Tommy entre las rodillas.

—¿Qué te parece eso? —preguntaba a su mujer—. Baila tan al compás de la música como si fuese una pieza de relojería. Cuando era más ligero bailaba bastante bien, pero nunca llegué a hacerlo como ese muchacho.

—Si baila así no es porque sus miembros sean ágiles, sino porque no tiene nada en la cabeza —contestó la señora Poyser—. De lo contrario nunca habría tenido el impulso de hacer de saltamontes delante de los señores, que se ríen de él con toda su alma.

—Pues mucho mejor si se divierten —contestó el señor Poyser, que era algo lento en advertir el lado ridículo de las cosas—. Pero parece que ahora se marchan a cenar. Vamos a ver qué hace Adam Bede. Está encargado de vigilar las bebidas y cosas por el estilo. Y creo que el pobre no va a divertirse mucho.

XXVI

El baile

Arthur había elegido el vestíbulo principal como sala de baile, y había acertado, porque ninguna otra estancia era tan espaciosa ni gozaba de la ventaja de que sus puertas diesen al jardín; además ninguna tenía tan fácil acceso desde las demás habitaciones. En realidad, el suelo de piedra no era apropiado para bailar, pero los danzarines estaban acostumbrados a bailar en Navidad sobre las losas de la cocina. Era uno de esos vestíbulos que hacen parecer armarios a las habitaciones que desembocan en ellos, y que están adornados con ángeles de estuco, con trompetas y guirnaldas de flores en el alto techo, así como por grandes medallones y distintos héroes en las paredes, alternando con algunas estatuas metidas en hornacinas. Es decir, un lugar muy apropiado para colocar grandes ramas de verde, y el señor Craig tuvo así ocasión de lucir su buen gusto y sus maravillosas plantas de estufa. Los anchos peldaños de la escalera de piedra estaban cubiertos de almohadones para que sirvieran de asiento a los niños que habían de presenciar el baile hasta las nueve y media, vigilados por las doncellas; y como la fiesta estaba reservada para los principales arrendatarios, el espacio disponible era suficiente. Grandes lámparas de papel de colores colgaban entre guirnaldas de vegetación e iluminaban el vestíbulo. Cuando las esposas y las hijas de los agricultores se asomaron a aquel lugar, creyeron que no era posible una esplendidez mayor y se imaginaron cómo serían las habitaciones del rey y de la reina. Al pensar en los primos y conocidos que quedaban fuera se apenaron al advertir que no tendrían esa ocasión de ver cómo marchaban las cosas en el gran mundo. Aunque el sol no se había puesto aún, las lámparas estaban ya encendidas, y en el exterior reinaba aquella luz suave que permite ver los objetos con mayor claridad que en pleno día.

Alrededor de la casa se desarrollaba una escena muy agradable. Los granjeros y sus familias paseaban por el césped, entre las flores y los arbustos, o por el ancho camino que nacía en la fachada este; a ambos lados del camino se extendía una faja de musgo interrumpida de vez en cuando por algún cedro de ancha copa o por algún gran abeto piramidal que dirigía sus ramas hacia el suelo. Poco a poco iban desapareciendo del jardín los grupos de aldeanos; los jóvenes eran atraídos por las luces que empezaban a resplandecer en las ventanas de la galería de la abadía destinada a sala de baile para ellos, y algunos de los mayores creían ya llegada la ocasión de volver a casa. Entre estos últimos figuraba Lisbeth Bede, y Seth la acompañó, no sólo impulsado por el amor filial, sino porque su conciencia no le habría permitido tomar parte en el baile. Para Seth aquel día había resultado muy melancólico; nunca había tenido más presente a Dinah que en aquella fiesta, donde nada se le parecía. Cuanto más miraba a los rostros frívolos de las muchachas vestidas de alegres colores, más vivamente la veía a ella, igual que la belleza y la grandeza de una Virgen se siente más intensamente cuando nos la ha ocultado una figura vulgar por un momento.

Pero la presencia de Dinah en su mente sólo servía para soportar mejor el humor de su madre, que a última hora se mostró más inquieta que nunca. La pobre Lisbeth sufría a causa de una extraña lucha de sensaciones. La alegría y el orgullo que había sentido al enterarse del honor tributado a su querido hijo Adam, empezaban a ceder bajo el peso de los celos y la inquietud, que se acentuaron cuando Adam fue a decirle que el capitán deseaba que se quedase al baile. Veía a Adam alejarse de ella por momentos, y Lisbeth llegó a desear sus antiguas penas, pues entonces el joven parecía preocuparse más por su madre.

—Eso de tomar parte en un baile no me parece bien —dijo— cuando tu padre apenas hace cinco semanas que fue enterrado.

—No pienses así, madre —dijo Adam procurando ser cariñoso ese día—. Yo no bailaré, me limitaré a asistir a la fiesta. Pero como el capitán desea que me quede, parecería un desaire no acceder. Y ya sabes

cómo se ha portado hoy conmigo.

—Bueno. Haz lo que quieras, tu madre no tiene el derecho de inmiscuirse en tu vida. Ahora yo soy una vieja y tú empiezas a abandonarme en busca del sol que más calienta.

—Bueno, madre. Voy a decir al capitán que no quieres que me quede y que me permita volver a casa. Creo que no lo tomará a mal —dijo con esfuerzo, pues en realidad deseaba estar aquella noche cerca de Hetty.

—No quiero que hagas eso, el joven caballero podría enfadarse. Haz lo que te ha mandado, y Seth y yo nos iremos a casa. Comprendo que es un gran honor que te consideren así. ¿Y quién puede estar más orgullosa que tu madre? ¿Acaso no te he criado yo?

—Pues bien, adiós, madre. Adiós, muchacho. Acuérdate de Gyp cuando llegues a casa —dijo Adam volviéndose hacia la puerta que conducía al espacio destinado a los juegos con objeto de reunirse con los Poyser; había estado tan ocupado durante toda la tarde que no tuvo tiempo de hablar con Hetty.

Pronto sus ojos distinguieron un grupo distante y supo que era el que buscaba. Y como aquel grupo regresaba entonces hacia la casa, se apresuró a reunirse con él.

—¡Hola, Adam! Me alegro mucho de volver a verle —dijo el señor Poyser, que llevaba a Totty en brazos —. Ahora que ha terminado el trabajo deseará divertirse un poco. Hetty ha comprometido ya muchísimos bailes y yo le he preguntado si había hablado con usted sobre el asunto.

—El caso es que no quería bailar esta noche —contestó Adam, que en cuanto miró a Hetty estuvo tentado a cambiar de intención.

—¡Tonterías! —exclamó el señor Poyser—. Tenga en cuenta que esta noche va a bailar todo el mundo, a excepción del viejo caballero y de la señora Irwine. La señora Best nos ha dicho que la señorita Irwine y la señorita Lydia bailarán también y que el joven caballero lo hará en primer lugar con mi esposa, para inaugurar el baile. Así que ella se verá obligada a bailar, aunque no lo ha hecho desde la Navidad anterior al nacimiento de la niña. Por tanto, Adam, usted que es un muchacho joven y guapo, no debe daros vergüenza sino que tiene que bailar como todos los demás.

—Claro —dijo la señora Poyser—. No sería bien visto. Me consta que el baile es una tontería; pero si nos abstenemos de hacer muchas cosas por ser tonterías, apenas podríamos disfrutar en este mundo.

Cuando el caldo está servido conviene bebérselo, porque si no se enfría.

—En tal caso, si Hetty quisiera bailar conmigo —dijo Adam, conformándose con el argumento de la señora Poyser o cediendo a otro impulso—, bailaría con ella los bailes que tenga libres.

—No tengo pareja para el cuarto baile —dijo Hetty—. De modo que, si quiere, podemos bailarlo.

—Pero debería bailar el primer baile —dijo el señor Poyser—, porque de lo contrario llamará la atención de todo el mundo. Hay multitud de muchachas entre quienes elegir, y no olvidemos que a ellas no les gusta ver a los hombres sin bailar y en un rincón.

Adam, convencido de la justicia de la observación del señor Poyser, se dijo también que no sería conveniente no bailar con nadie más que con Hetty; y recordando que Jonathan Burge tenía aquel día algunos motivos para estar resentido, resolvió invitar a la señorita Mary a bailar el primer baile, en caso de que no estuviera comprometida.

—Están dando las ocho en el reloj —dijo el señor Poyser—. Así que hemos de apresurarnos para que el caballero y las damas no lleguen antes que nosotros; eso no estaría bien.

En cuanto entraron en el vestíbulo y los tres niños se hubieron sentado en los escalones al cuidado de Molly, se abrieron las puertas de la sala y entró Arthur vestido de uniforme y acompañado de la señora Irwine. Condujo a la dama a un estrado provisto de dosel y adornado con plantas de estufa, donde ella y la señorita Anne habían de sentarse en compañía del anciano señor Donnithorne para contemplar el baile como hacen los reyes y las reinas de las comedias. Arthur se vistió de uniforme para complacer, según dijo, a los arrendatarios, quienes opinaban que su grado militar era un camino para alcanzar mayores dignidades. Y no tenía inconveniente alguno en complacerlos, porque en realidad el uniforme le sentaba muy bien.

Antes de sentarse, el anciano caballero recorrió el vestíbulo para saludar a los arrendatarios y dirigir palabras amables a sus mujeres. Siempre era muy cortés, pero tras largas reflexiones, los agricultores habían descubierto que aquella cortesía era uno de los indicios de la dureza de su corazón. Se observó que aquella noche se mostraba particularmente afable con la señora Poyser, a quien preguntó por su salud, recomendándole que se fortaleciera por medio del agua fría y evitando tomar medicinas. La señora Poyser le hizo una reverencia y le dio las gracias con un gran dominio de sí misma; pero en cuanto se hubo alejado murmuró a oídos de su marido: «Me apostaría la cabeza a que nos prepara alguna jugarreta. El viejo Harry no menea nunca el rabo sin tener motivos». El señor Poyser no tuvo tiempo de contestar, porque en ese

momento se acercó Arthur y dijo:

—Señora Poyser, vengo a rogarle el favor de que me conceda este primer baile; y usted, señor Poyser, vaya a invitar a mi tía, porque le reclama como pareja.

Las pálidas mejillas de la mujer se ruborizaron al notar el honor de que era objeto, mientras Arthur la conducía a un extremo de la estancia; pero el señor Poyser, a quien una jarra de más le había devuelto su juvenil confianza en su aspecto y en su habilidad como bailarín, les acompañó, muy orgulloso, elogiándose en secreto y persuadido de que la señorita Lydia en toda su vida tendría una pareja como él, capaz de levantarla del suelo tantas veces como quisiera. A fin de equilibrar los honores entre las dos parroquias, la señorita Irwine bailó con Luke Britton, el granjero más importante de Broxton, y el señor Gawaine lo hizo con la señorita Britton. El señor Irwine, después de dejar a su hermana Anne descansando, fue a la galería de la abadía, según había convenido con Arthur, para ver cómo iba la alegría de los demás invitados. Mientras tanto, en el vestíbulo las otras parejas menos distinguidas ocupaban sus puestos respectivos. Hetty fue invitada por el inevitable señor Craig, y Mary Burge por Adam; entonces sonaron los primeros acordes de la extraordinaria contradanza, que es el mejor de todos los bailes.

¡Qué lástima que el suelo no fuese de madera! En ese caso los gruesos zapatos de los presentes al compás de la música habrían resonado mejor que muchos tambores juntos. ¿Dónde podríamos contemplar en nuestros días aquel alegre pataleo, aquellos graciosos movimientos de cabeza, la gracia ondulante de las manos que se ofrecían? Aquel baile sencillo de honradas matronas que, por espacio de una hora, olvidaban el cuidado de la casa y de la lechería; que recordaban, pero no fingían la juventud perdida; que no estaban celosas, sino, por el contrario, orgullosas de las jovencitas que tenían a su lado; aquella alegría de los graves maridos, que dirigían pequeños cumplidos a sus esposas, como si hubiesen vuelto los días en que las cortejaban; aquellos jóvenes y aquellas muchachas algo confusos y tímidos con sus respectivas parejas, que no tenían nada que decirse; todo aquello sería algo muy agradable de ver ahora, en vez de los corpiños escotados y las largas faldas, de las miradas que se fijan en los trajes y de los hombres indolentes de botas de charol que sonríen con doble intención.

En aquel baile sólo una cosa molestaba a Martin Poyser, y era que siempre se tropezaba con Luke Britton, aquel estúpido granjero. Pensó en dirigirle una mirada fría al pasar por delante de él, pero como tenía en frente a la señorita Irwine y no al desagradable Luke, se abstuvo para no molestar a la pobre señorita. Así que se entregó a la hilaridad, sin pensar en la conveniencia de su conducta.

¡Cómo latía el corazón de Hetty mientras Arthur se acercaba a ella! Aquel día apenas la había mirado, pero ahora debería tomarle la mano. ¿Se la estrecharía? ¿Fijaría los ojos en ella? Estaba segura de que se echaría a llorar si él no le daba ninguna muestra de cariño. Ya había llegado. Le tomó la mano… y se la estrechó. Hetty palideció al mirarle por un instante y al encontrar sus ojos antes de empezar a bailar. Aquella pálida mirada causó a Arthur un dolor apagado, aunque no tuvo más remedio que bailar, sonreír y bromear como si nada ocurriese. La misma cara pondría Hetty cuando le dijera lo que había decidido comunicarle; y él no podría soportarlo otra vez, y cometería la tontería de abandonarse de nuevo a aquella pasión. En realidad, las miradas de Hetty no tenían tanto significado como él se figuraba. Sólo eran la señal de una lucha entre el deseo de que él se fijara en ella y el temor de que otros lo advirtiesen. Pero el rostro de Hetty tenía un lenguaje que expresaba muy bien sus sensaciones. Hay semblantes a los que la naturaleza dota de un sentimiento y de una expresión que no pertenecen al alma humana que vive en el interior, sino que hablan de las alegrías y de las tristezas de pasadas generaciones; ojos que expresan el profundo amor que sin duda ha existido y existe aún en alguna parte, pero que no lo sienten ellos. Del mismo modo que un idioma puede expresar una poesía que ignora los labios que lo usan, aquella mirada de Hetty oprimía a Arthur con un temor que contenía en sí una delicia terrible y no confesada; es decir, el recelo de que ella le quisiera demasiado. Le esperaba una dura tarea y en aquel momento se dijo que habría dado tres años de su juventud a cambio de abandonarse sin remordimientos a su pasión por Hetty.

Estas eran las ideas que cruzaban la mente de Arthur mientras acompañaba a la señora Poyser, que jadeaba agotada y se decía en secreto que nadie la obligaría a bailar de nuevo, a descansar al comedor, donde habían servido ya la cena para los invitados que quisieran tomarla.

—Espero que Hetty no se olvide de que debe bailar con usted, señor —dijo la buena e inocente mujer—, porque es tan despistada que puede haber comprometido todos sus bailes. Por eso le he recomendado que reservase algunos.

—Muchas gracias, señora Poyser —dijo Arthur estremeciéndose ligeramente—. Ahora siéntese en ese sillón. Mills le servirá lo que desee.

Se alejó en busca de otra pareja entrada en años, pues había que honrar a las mujeres casadas antes de invitar a las jóvenes. Y así prosiguieron los bailes de la comarca, el ruido de pies, las graciosas inclinaciones

de cabeza y el suave balanceo de las manos.

Por fin llegó el cuarto baile, tan deseado por el grave Adam, convertido ahora en un delicado muchacho de dieciocho años; cuando nos enamoramos por primera vez, todos somos así. Adam apenas había estrechado alguna vez las manos de Hetty y sólo bailó con ella en otra ocasión. La había seguido ansioso con la mirada durante toda la noche, a pesar suyo, y eso había acabado de enamorarle. Se dijo que tenía unos movimientos preciosos y unas maneras encantadoras. Aquella noche sonreía menos que de costumbre y parecía estar dominada por la melancolía. «¡Dios la bendiga! —se dijo Adam—. ¡Ojalá fuesen capaces de hacerla dichosa un fuerte brazo que trabaje para ella y un corazón fiel que la ame!».

Y entonces se vio a sí mismo regresando a casa del trabajo, atrayendo a Hetty y sintiendo su suave mejilla contra la suya. De este modo llegó a olvidar dónde estaba e igual le habría importado que la música y el ruido de los pasos fueran el rumor de la lluvia y los aullidos del viento.

Había llegado la ocasión de ir en busca de la joven, pues iba a empezar el baile. Hetty se hallaba en el extremo del vestíbulo, cerca de la escalera, hablando en voz baja con Molly, que acababa de entregarle a la dormida Totty para ir a buscar los chales y los gorros. La señora Poyser se llevó a los dos niños al comedor para darles un poco de pastel antes de que emprendiesen el regreso en el coche con el abuelo, y Molly iba a seguirles cuanto antes.

—Permítame que sostenga a la niña —dijo Adam mientras Molly subía la escalera—. Los niños pesan mucho cuando están dormidos.

Hetty aceptó con gusto la oferta, pues sostener a la niña de pie no le resultaba muy agradable. Pero este segundo traslado tuvo la desgraciada consecuencia de despertar a Totty, que, como todas las niñas de su edad, lo hizo en el momento menos oportuno. Cuando Hetty la dejaba en brazos de Adam y aún no había retirado los suyos, Totty abrió los ojos y empezó a dar puñetazos con la izquierda en el brazo de Adam y con la derecha agarró al collar de cuentas de Hetty. El guardapelo salió de su escondite y la cadena se rompió, de modo que Hetty no pudo evitar que todo se desparramara por el suelo.

—¡El guardapelo, el guardapelo! —dijo en voz baja y asustada a Adam—. No se preocupe de las cuentas.

Adam pudo ver dónde había caído la joya, pues ésta atrajo su mirada en cuanto asomó por el borde del vestido: estaba en el entarimado de madera dispuesto para la banda de música, y mientras Adam la recogía, pudo ver el cristal que protegía dos mechones de pelo, uno oscuro y otro más claro. El medallón cayó cara arriba, por lo que no se rompió el cristal. Adam le dio la vuelta con la mano y vio el lado posterior, que era de oro y esmalte.

—No le ha pasado nada —dijo devolviéndoselo a su dueña, que tenía ambas manos ocupadas en sostener a Totty.

—¡Oh, no importa! No vale nada —dijo Hetty que, si bien palideció en un primer momento, luego se había sonrojado.

—¿Que no importa? —preguntó Adam con gravedad—. Pues me ha parecido muy asustada. Lo conservaré mientras no pueda cogerlo —añadió cerrando la mano sobre él para que no creyese que quería examinarlo de nuevo.

Mientras tanto, Molly volvió con los gorros y los chales y en cuanto se hubo hecho cargo de Totty, Adam dejó el guardapelo en la mano de Hetty, quien lo tomó con aparente indiferencia y se lo guardó en el bolsillo. Interiormente estaba enfadada con Adam por haberlo visto, pero decidió no dar muestra de ninguna agitación.

—Mire —dijo—. Ya va a empezar el baile. Vamos.

Adam asintió en silencio. Se sentía dominado por la extrañeza y por la inquietud al mismo tiempo. ¿Acaso tenía Hetty un pretendiente a quien él no conocía? Ninguno de sus amigos o conocidos podía haberle regalado un guardapelo como ése; y ninguno de sus admiradores estaba en situación de novio aceptado, como sin duda sería el caso del que le había regalado aquella joya. Adam se perdía en la imposibilidad de encontrar alguna persona que justificara sus temores. Sólo sentía, con dolor terrible, que había en Hetty algo desconocido para él, y que mientras había estado meciéndose en las dulces esperanzas de que ella le correspondiese, ella había entregado su amor a otro. El placer de bailar con Hetty se había desvanecido; sus ojos la miraban con una expresión inquieta e interrogante; no acertaba a decirle cosa alguna, y ella, a su vez, tampoco parecía inclinada a hablar, de modo que ambos se alegraron de que terminase el baile.

Adam estaba decidido a no quedarse más tiempo; nadie le necesitaba y nadie notaría su ausencia. En cuanto salió al exterior empezó a andar a pasos rápidos, según su costumbre, huyendo sin saber de qué, atormentado por el presentimiento de que el recuerdo de aquel día, por otra parte tan lleno de honores y de promesas, quedaría envenenado para siempre. De pronto, cuando ya estaba lejos del cazadero, se detuvo

sobresaltado por un rayo de esperanza que le devolvió la vida. Quizás era un tonto al dar tanta importancia a aquel detalle insignificante. Hetty, aficionada como era a las baratijas, bien podía haberse comprado aquélla. Es verdad que parecía valiosa, como las joyas guardadas en estuches de satén en la joyería de Rosseter. Pero Adam tenía nociones muy poco claras del valor de esas cosas y se dijo que quizás no costaría más de una guinea. Era posible que Hetty hubiese tenido esta cantidad ahorrada y, en tal caso, era muy capaz de gastársela de aquel modo. Era muy joven y, a su pesar, le gustaban los adornos. Pero siendo así, ¿por qué se asustó y cambió de color al ver que se caía, fingiendo luego que no le importaba nada? ¿Se habría avergonzado de que él viese que poseía una cosa tan bonita y pensase que hizo mal al gastar su dinero en ella, pues le constaba que a Adam no le gustaba su afición a las baratijas? Eso sería una prueba de que le importaba su opinión. Y, a juzgar por el silencio y la gravedad de que él dio muestras luego, tal vez se disgustó y creyó que se mostraba muy severo con sus pequeñas debilidades. Mientras Adam andaba con menor agitación, examinando esta nueva esperanza, lamentaba haberse portado de un modo tan impropio y haber disgustado a la pobre muchacha. Indudablemente esta última suposición era la verdadera, porque ¿cómo podía Hetty tener un novio sin que él lo supiese? Jamás la joven se alejaba de la casa de su tío durante más de un día. No podía mantener ninguna relación sin que sus parientes lo supieran ni intimidades que sus tíos ignoraran. Sería una locura imaginarse que un novio pudiese haberle regalado aquel guardapelo. El mechón negro era de Hetty, sin duda alguna, aunque Adam no había podido examinarlo muy bien, y en cuanto al de color más claro, ignoraba de quién podría ser. Quizás perteneció a su padre o a su madre, que murieron cuando ella era niña y, en tal caso, era natural que junto a aquel recuerdo guardase unos cuantos cabellos suyos.

Adam se acostó consolado después de tejer una ingeniosa red de probabilidades para engañarse a sí mismo: la mejor pantalla que un hombre juicioso puede situar entre él y la verdad. Su último pensamiento consciente se confundió con el sueño, en el que creyó verse otra vez junto a Hetty, en Hall Farm, rogándole que le perdonase por haberse mostrado tan frío y silencioso.

Mientras él soñaba de este modo, Arthur bailaba con Hetty y le decía con palabras apresuradas:

—Estaré en el bosque pasado mañana a las siete. Ve lo más pronto que puedas.

Las locas alegrías y esperanzas de Hetty, que antes había visto amenazadas y casi muertas por una nonada, revivieron inconscientes del peligro que la amenazaba. Era feliz por primera vez en aquel día y deseaba que el baile durase horas enteras. Lo mismo habría querido Arthur, pues aquélla era la última debilidad que se permitía; y un hombre jamás siente con mayor intensidad la deliciosa languidez de una pasión que cuando se ha persuadido de que al día siguiente ha de alejarla de sí.

Pero los deseos de la señora Poyser eran completamente opuestos, pues estaba alarmada por el temor de que se retrasara la elaboración de los quesos al día siguiente. Ahora que Hetty había cumplido con su deber bailando una vez con el joven caballero, el señor Poyser debía salir para ver si el cochecillo había vuelto a buscarles, pues eran ya las diez y media, y aunque su marido quiso darle a entender la inconveniencia de ser los primeros en marcharse, la señora Poyser mantuvo su decisión con firmeza, a pesar de todos los pesares.

—¡Cómo! ¿Se va ya, señora Poyser? —dijo el anciano señor Donnithorne cuando ella fue a despedirse y a pedirle permiso para marcharse—. Esperaba que nadie se fuese antes de las once. La señora Irwine y yo, que somos viejos, tenemos la intención de quedarnos hasta entonces.

—Es natural, su señoría, que los caballeros se queden hasta hora avanzada, pues no han de pensar en sus quesos. Para nosotros es ya muy tarde, y no hay manera de dar a entender a las vacas que mañana no las ordeñaremos tan pronto. Por consiguiente, háganos el favor de excusamos y de permitir que nos marchemos.

—Mira —dijo a su marido en cuanto hubieron subido al cochecillo—, preferiría tener en un solo día la colada y la fabricación de la cerveza que asistir otra vez a una fiesta como ésa. No hay nada que fatigue tanto como ir de un lado a otro y mirar a un sitio sin saber lo que harás un momento después; y además no dejar de sonreír a todo el mundo como si fueras una vendedora de mercado, para que nadie piense que eres una maleducada. Y en cuanto la fiesta termina, lo único que tienes es la cara pálida y el estómago revuelto por comer cosas que no te gustan nada.

—No, no —replicó el señor Poyser, que estaba contentísimo y convencido de que había pasado un gran día—. De vez en cuando conviene un poco de diversión. Y tú has bailado tan bien como cualquiera, de modo que puedes desafiar a todas las mujeres casadas de la parroquia por lo que se refiere a la ligereza de las piernas. Además, el joven caballero te ha tributado un gran honor al bailar contigo en primer lugar. Sin duda eso se debe a que yo ocupé la cabecera de la mesa y fui el primero en brindar. Y Hetty, también…, estoy seguro de que nunca ha bailado con otra pareja semejante… Un distinguido caballero, vestido de

uniforme. Mira, Hetty, eso te servirá como recuerdo de tu juventud cuando seas vieja. Entonces podrás contar que bailaste con el joven señor el día en que cumplió su mayoría de edad.

LIBRO CUARTO

XXVII

Una crisis

En la segunda quincena de agosto, es decir, tres semanas después de la fiesta del cumpleaños de Arthur, había empezado la siega del trigo en las tierras del norte de nuestro condado de Loamshire, pero la cosecha se vería postergada por las fuertes lluvias que originaron inundaciones y grandes daños en toda la comarca. Los granjeros de Broxton y Hayslope, al estar situados en tierras altas y en valles cruzados por arroyos, no habían sufrido los efectos de estas lluvias, y como no puedo afirmar que fuesen personas excepcionales que prefiriesen el bien general al suyo propio, ya comprenderá el lector que no les disgustaba el rápido aumento del precio del pan, tanto más cuanto que abrigaban esperanzas de segar su trigo en perfecto estado; y, en efecto, algunos días de sol y unos vientos que acabaron de secar la tierra, confirmaron estas esperanzas.

El 18 de agosto fue uno de estos días, pues brilló el sol de un modo mucho más alegre a los ojos de todos tras los días nublados anteriores. Enormes masas de nubes cruzaban rápidamente el cielo azul, y las grandes montañas redondeadas que había más allá del cazadero parecían moverse a causa de sus fugitivas sombras. El sol quedaba oculto por un instante, y luego brillaba cálido, con renovada alegría; el viento arrancaba las hojas, aún verdes, de los arbustos; en torno a las granjas se oía un ruido frecuente de puertas que se cerraban; las manzanas se caían al suelo, y los caballos, sueltos junto a los senderos en el prado comunal, mostraban sus crines agitadas por el viento. Sin embargo el viento contribuía a la alegría general a causa del resplandor del sol. Era un día alegre para los niños, que corrían y gritaban, en su deseo de hacer más ruido que la naturaleza, y las personas mayores también estaban muy contentas, pues creían que, en cuanto hubiese cesado el vendaval, vendrían días más hermosos. Sólo deseaban que el trigo no estuviese lo bastante maduro, para que no se deshicieran las espigas, y el grano no se dispersara y acabara desperdiciándose.

No obstante, aquel día podía traer un gran dolor a un hombre. Porque si es cierto que la naturaleza parece presentir en ciertos momentos la suerte de un individuo, también es verdad que muchas veces no da ninguna importancia a la de otro. No hay hora en que no nazcan la alegría y el dolor simultáneamente; cada mañana espléndida trae nuevas enfermedades y nuevas aflicciones, así como también nuevas fuerzas para el genio y para el amor. Los hombres son numerosos y sus suertes muy distintas, de modo que no es de extrañar que la naturaleza se muestre con frecuencia en contradicción con las crisis de nuestras vidas. Somos hijos de una dilatada familia y, por consiguiente, debemos aprender que nuestras desgracias no tienen una importancia muy grande, y que hemos de contentarnos con una dicha moderada y ayudarnos unos a otros cuanto nos sea posible.

Adam tenía un día muy atareado, pues últimamente trabajaba el doble que de costumbre; continuaba ejerciendo de encargado para Jonathan Burge hasta que se encontrase alguna otra persona conveniente para ocupar su puesto, y Jonathan no tenía ninguna prisa en hallarla. Sin embargo desempeñó su doble cometido con satisfacción, pues sus esperanzas con respecto a Hetty se habían renovado. Desde el día de la fiesta del cumpleaños, la joven parecía hacer un esfuerzo por ser amable con él siempre que se veían, como si quisiera darle a entender que le había perdonado su silencio y su frialdad durante el baile. Él no volvió a mencionar el guardapelo; se sentía demasiado feliz cuando ella le sonreía y además advirtió en la joven un carácter más suave, algo que interpretó como ternura y seriedad femenina.

«¡Ah! —pensaba una y otra vez—. La pobrecilla sólo tiene diecisiete años, y no hay duda de que pronto se volverá más reflexiva. Su tía dice siempre que es muy hábil e inteligente para el trabajo. Estoy seguro de que será una esposa de quien mi madre no tendrá motivo de queja».

En realidad, desde la fiesta de cumpleaños no la había visto más que dos veces en su casa; porque un domingo, cuando él se disponía a acompañarla desde la iglesia a Hall Farm, Hetty se unió al grupo de los principales servidores del cazadero y volvió a casa con ellos, casi como si estuviera dispuesta a alentar al señor Craig.

—Se aficiona demasiado a las personas que encuentra en las habitaciones del ama de llaves —observó la señora Poyser—. A mí nunca me han gustado mucho los criados, pues son como los perros rollizos de las personas distinguidas, que no sirven para ladrar ni para el carnicero, sino sólo para ser mostrados en público.

Otra tarde Hetty fue a Treddleston a comprar algunas cosas; cuando Adam volvía a su casa, con gran sorpresa la vio a cierta distancia atravesando un portillo bastante apartado del camino del pueblo. Pero cuando se apresuró a ir a su encuentro, notó que ella le saludaba muy amable, y hasta le rogó que la acompañase al ver que él se disponía a dejarla en la puerta del patio de su casa. Le explicó que, al volver a Treddleston, había dado una vuelta por los campos porque no quería regresar tan pronto a su casa; era muy agradable disfrutar del aire y de la luz; su tía siempre se oponía a su deseo de salir.

—¡Oh, venga conmigo! —dijo cuando él se disponía a despedirse junto a la puerta.

Adam no se sintió con fuerzas para negarse y siguió a la joven. La señora Poyser se mostró contenta al verla y se limitó a hacer una ligera observación acerca de su tardanza; en cuanto a Hetty que, cuando él la había encontrado, parecía estar muy pensativa, sonrió, habló y atendió a todo el mundo con desacostumbrada rapidez.

Esta fue la última vez que la vio. Adam pensaba organizarse el trabajo de modo que tuviera tiempo para ir al día siguiente a la granja. Según le constaba, ella iría al cazadero para coser en compañía de la doncella de las señoras, de modo que Adam se proponía trabajar lo máximo aquella tarde para poder disponer de la siguiente.

Una de sus tareas consistía en vigilar unas pequeñas reparaciones en la granja del cazadero, que, hasta entonces, había ocupado Satchell, el administrador. Corría el rumor de que el anciano caballero iba a alquilar a un hombre elegante, de botas altas, a quien se vio un día dirigirse allá. Sólo el deseo de adquirir un arrendatario podía explicar que el caballero se hubiese decidido a hacer reparaciones, aunque los reunidos el sábado por la tarde en el establecimiento del señor Casson convinieron, entre el humo de las pipas, que ningún hombre que tuviese sentido común tomaría la granja del cazadero, a no ser que se le diese un poco más de tierra de labor. Pero, fuera lo que fuere, el caso es que se habían encargado las reparaciones para ejecutarlas con toda rapidez; y Adam, actuando en nombre del señor Burge, cumplía las órdenes con su energía habitual. Pero aquel día había estado tan ocupado en otros lugares que no pudo llegar a la granja del cazadero hasta muy avanzada la tarde; entonces observó que un tejado viejo que se disponía a apuntalar había cedido. Sin duda convenía acabar de echarlo abajo, y Adam imaginó inmediatamente un plan para construirlo de nuevo a fin de convertirlo en establo de vacas y terneras y depósito de herramientas, aunque sin gran gasto de material. En cuanto se hubieron marchado los obreros, se sentó, tomó su libreta de bolsillo y se entretuvo en trazar un plano y en hacer una lista de los gastos, para mostrárselo todo a Burge a la mañana siguiente y que éste pudiese lograr la aprobación del caballero. Realizar un buen trabajo, por pequeño que fuese, era siempre algo agradable para Adam. Se había instalado ante un banco de carpintero en el que apoyaba su libreta, y silbaba volviendo la cabeza a uno y otro lado con una sonrisa de satisfacción y hasta de orgullo, porque si a Adam le gustaba hacer un buen trabajo, también le satisfacía enorgullecerse de haberlo hecho. Creo que las únicas personas que no tienen esta debilidad son las que carecen de amor propio.

Eran casi las siete cuando se ponía la chaqueta para marcharse; al dar la última mirada, observó que Seth, que había estado trabajando allí aquel día, se había dejado el capazo de las herramientas. «¡Caramba! Se ha olvidado las herramientas —pensó Adam—. Y mañana debe trabajar en el taller. Nunca he visto a un muchacho tan distraído. Si tuviese la cabeza suelta, sería capaz de olvidársela también. Por suerte me he dado cuenta y podré llevarme sus cosas».

Las construcciones de la granja se hallaban a un extremo del cazadero y a unos diez minutos de la abadía. Adam llegó hasta allí en su póney para dejar su montura en la cuadra antes de regresar a casa. Al llegar a la cuadra, encontró al señor Craig, que había ido a examinar el nuevo caballo del capitán, en el cual éste debía montar dos días después. El señor Craig entretuvo un rato a Adam para contarle que todos los criados iban a reunirse en la puerta del patio para desear buena suerte al joven caballero en cuanto saliese. Por esta razón, cuando Adam llegó al cazadero con el capazo de las herramientas cargado al hombro, el sol ya estaba a punto de ponerse y dirigía sus rayos rojizos y casi horizontales entre los troncos de los viejos robles tiñendo la tierra con un resplandor extraordinario, como si estuviese cubierta de joyas. El viento

había cesado por fin y sólo soplaba una suave brisa que agitaba las hojas de tallos delicados. Cualquiera que hubiese permanecido en casa todo el día habría tenido mucho gusto en salir a dar un paseo, pero como Adam había estado al aire libre, deseaba acortar el camino de regreso; y así se dispuso a hacerlo, atravesando el cazadero y cruzando la alameda que hacía varios años que no pisaba. Caminó pues por los estrechos senderos que se abrían entre los helechos seguido por Gyp, sin entretenerse en observar los magníficos cambios de luz y, en realidad, sin fijarse en ellos, aunque se daba cuenta de su existencia con una apacible satisfacción que se confundía con las ideas sugeridas por su día de trabajo. ¿Cómo podría no haber sentido aquella belleza?

De pronto, Adam recordó lo que el señor Craig había dicho acerca de Arthur Donnithorne, y pensó en su partida y en los cambios que podrían tener lugar antes de que regresara. Luego evocó con afecto antiguas escenas de amistad juvenil y pensó en las buenas cualidades de Arthur, de las que Adam se enorgullecía, como siempre ocurre con un superior que nos honra. Una naturaleza como la de Adam, con gran necesidad de amor y de amistad, deposita gran parte de su felicidad en lo que puede creer y sentir por los demás. Él no tenía ningún mundo ideal de héroes muertos, conocía muy poco de la vida de los hombres en el pasado, y por tanto necesitaba dedicar su admiración y su afecto a los seres que vivían en su tiempo. Estas ideas agradables sobre Arthur hicieron aparecer en su rostro, habitualmente grave, una expresión mucho más suave. Tal vez fueron la causa de que, al abrir el viejo portón verde que conducía a la alameda, se detuviese para acariciar a Gyp y dirigirle una palabra afectuosa.

Después de esta pausa reanudó el paso siguiendo el ancho y sinuoso sendero que conducía a la alameda. ¡Qué hermosas encinas! Le gustaban sobre todo los árboles hermosos. Del mismo modo que un pescador se fija sobre todo en el mar, Adam disfrutaba más viendo los árboles que otra cosa. Los conservaba en la memoria, como podría hacerlo un pintor, y recordaba todas las rugosidades y nudos de su corteza, las curvas y los ángulos de sus ramas y podía calcular con exactitud la altura y el grosor de un tronco con sólo detenerse a contemplar el árbol. No es de extrañar, pues, que a pesar de su deseo de apretar el paso, no pudiera menos que interrumpirlo para admirar una enorme encina que crecía en un recodo del sendero y convencerse de que no se trataba de dos árboles unidos, sino de uno solo. Durante el resto de su vida recordaría aquel momento en que examinaba tranquilamente el árbol, igual que un hombre recuerda la última mirada que dirigió al hogar en el que transcurrió su infancia antes de darse la vuelta y perderlo de vista para siempre. La encina se hallaba en el último recodo del sendero, antes de desembocar en la alameda, en un túnel de ramas que dejaban pasar la luz crepuscular, y en cuanto Adam se apartó del árbol para continuar la marcha, se fijó en dos figuras que se hallaban a veinte metros de distancia.

Se quedó paralizado y pálido como una estatua. Las dos figuras estaban de pie, con las manos unidas, y a punto de despedirse; y cuando se inclinaban para besarse, Gyp, que había estado corriendo por entre las matas, los vio y dio un ladrido. Se separaron sobresaltadas y acto seguido una atravesó el portón que había en el extremo de la alameda y la otra, dando media vuelta, echó a andar lentamente hacia Adam, que continuaba pálido y apretaba convulsivamente el palo del que colgaba el capazo de herramientas sobre su hombro; al mismo tiempo, miraba al individuo que se aproximaba de un modo en el que el asombro se transformaba rápidamente en ferocidad.

Arthur Donnithorne parecía estar sofocado y excitado; había recurrido a la bebida para hacer más soportables sus ideas desagradables. Aquel día debió de beber más vino que de costumbre y estaba aún bajo su agradable influencia, de modo que aquel encuentro no buscado con Adam no le produjo la incomodidad que le habría producido de haber estado sobrio. Además, creía que Adam era la más comprensiva de cuantas personas hubieran podido haberle sorprendido con Hetty, y con seguridad no divulgaría el descubrimiento. Arthur estaba seguro de que el hombre incluso se reiría en cuanto le explicase el asunto. Por eso se dirigió a él tranquilamente, mientras su rostro congestionado, su traje de tarde de fino lienzo y las manos blancas y cubiertas de joyas, medio metidas en los bolsillos de su chaleco, brillaban a la extraña luz de la tarde que las nubes reflejaban sobre los árboles.

Adam seguía inmóvil y sin dejar de mirarle mientras se acercaba. Entonces comprendió todo lo que había ocurrido; se explicó la existencia del guardapelo y todos los detalles que antes le habían parecido dudosos; una terrible y deslumbradora luz alteró el sentido de todo lo ocurrido en el pasado. De haber movido un solo músculo, habría saltado sobre Arthur como un tigre; y en medio de las emociones encontradas que llenaron aquellos largos momentos, se dijo que no cedería a la pasión, sino que hablaría como era debido. Se quedó como petrificado por una invisible fuerza, que no era otra que su voluntad firme.

—¿Qué hay, Adam? —preguntó Arthur—. Has estado contemplando esas hayas viejas, ¿eh? Aunque el hacha no las amenaza, pues esta alameda es sagrada. Cuando me dirigía a mi rincón favorito, o sea el

Hermitage, me he encontrado a la guapa Hetty Sorrel. Hetty no debería andar por ahí a estas horas. Por eso la acompañé hasta el portón y le pedí un beso como recompensa. Ahora debo irme; esto está muy húmedo. Buenas noches, Adam, ya nos veremos mañana para despedirnos.

Arthur estaba demasiado preocupado por representar bien su papel para advertir la expresión del rostro de Adam; no lo miraba directamente, sino que paseaba su vista indiferente a su alrededor, y de pronto levantó un pie para examinar la suela del zapato. No quería decir más; creía haber engañado ya al honrado Adam, y así, una vez pronunciadas las últimas palabras, echó a andar.

—Un momento, señor —dijo Adam con voz perentoria y sin volverse—. Tengo que decirle unas palabras.

Arthur se detuvo sorprendido. A las personas sensibles les afecta tanto el cambio de tono como una palabra inesperada, y el capitán Donnithorne tenía además un carácter a la vez afectuoso y altivo. Todavía le sorprendió más que Adam no se moviese, sino que continuase de espaldas a él, como para indicarle que retrocediera. ¿Qué se proponía? Quizás quería tratar en serio aquel incidente. ¡Al diablo con él! Arthur sintió nacer su cólera. Su predisposición protectora tenía su punto débil, y con la rabia y la confusión se mezclaba el sentimiento de que un hombre como Adam, a quien había favorecido tanto, no tenía derecho a criticar su conducta. Sin embargo, se sentía dominado, como siempre ocurre al que obra mal, por el hombre cuya buena opinión desea merecer. Así pues, pese a su orgullo y su carácter, había tanto ruego como cólera al replicar:

—¿Qué quieres decir, Adam?

—Quiero decirle, señor —contestó el joven, con el mismo tono severo y sin volverse—, que no me engaña con sus palabras. Ésta no es la primera vez que se encuentra con Hetty Sorrel en la alameda y tampoco la primera que la besa.

Arthur no sabía si Adam hablaba basándose en suposiciones o en su conocimiento de lo ocurrido. Esta inseguridad le impidió dar una respuesta prudente; en cambio, aumentó su irritación y exclamó secamente:

—Bueno, ¿y qué?

—Pues que en vez de actuar como un caballero correcto y honorable, según le creía hasta ahora, se ha portado como un bribón, un egoísta y un desconsiderado. Sabe tan bien como yo a lo que conduce que un caballero como usted bese y corteje a una joven como Hetty y, además, le haga regalos que ella no se atreve a mostrar a nadie. Y vuelvo a decir que actúa como un bribón, un egoísta y un ligero de cascos, aunque me duele en el alma hablarle de este modo, ya que preferiría haber perdido mi mano derecha.

—Pues ahora déjame que te diga, Adam —replicó Arthur conteniendo su creciente irritación y esforzándose en hablar con tono ligero—, que no solamente das pruebas de ser un impertinente, sino que además eres tonto. Todas las muchachas guapas no son tan inocentes como tú para imaginarse que si un caballero admira su belleza y las distingue con alguna atención, ello tiene necesariamente algún significado especial. A todo hombre le gusta flirtear con una muchacha hermosa y a éstas también les divierte. Cuanta mayor es la distancia que hay entre ambos, menor es el perjuicio posible, pues se supone que las muchachas no se verán tentadas a engañarse a sí mismas.

—Ignoro lo que significa eso de flirtear. Pero si quiere decir comportarse con una mujer como si la amase, pero sin quererla, le diré que no es acción digna de un hombre honrado, y lo que no es honrado puede perjudicar. No soy tonto y usted tampoco, y de sobra sabe que lo que dice no es cierto. Sabe muy bien que si se hiciese pública la conducta que ha seguido con Hetty, ella perdería su reputación, acarreando la vergüenza y el disgusto a ella y a sus parientes. ¿Qué importaría entonces que le haya hecho regalos y besado sin mala intención? Nadie lo creería y, por otra parte, no venga diciéndome que ella no se engaña. Le aseguro que se ha hecho tremendas ilusiones con respecto a usted, y que eso tal vez envenene el resto de su vida; además, ella no querrá nunca a otro hombre ni será feliz con su marido.

A medida que Adam hablaba, Arthur fue tranquilizándose, pues comprendió que éste no sabía nada de lo ocurrido y que no había sucedido nada irreparable con aquel encuentro molesto. Aún podía engañar a Adam. En su ingenuidad, Arthur se había metido en una situación en la que su única esperanza consistía en pronunciar una mentira detrás de otra. Y este descubrimiento calmó un poco su cólera.

—En fin, Adam —concluyó en un tono de amistosa condescendencia—, quizás tengas razón. Es posible que haya ido demasiado lejos al fijarme en esa belleza, robándole un beso de vez en cuando. Eres un hombre tan grave y serio que no comprendes esas pequeñas tentaciones. Por nada del mundo quisiera causar el menor perjuicio a esa pobre muchacha o a los excelentes Poyser. Pero creo que das demasiada importancia al asunto. Como ya sabes, me voy mañana, de modo que ya no podrá haber motivo para nuevas tentaciones. Ahora, despidámonos y no hablemos más del asunto. Todo esto quedará olvidado muy pronto.

—¡De ningún modo!

Adam pronunció estas palabras con una rabia que no pudo contener; arrojó al suelo el capazo de las herramientas y echó a andar hasta situarse frente a Arthur. Presa de los celos, se consideraba injuriado personalmente. ¿Quién de nosotros, en los primeros momentos de agonía, puede imaginarse que el causante de nuestro dolor no ha querido herirnos? En nuestra rebelión instintiva contra el dolor volvemos a ser niños y deseamos vivamente poder vengarnos. En aquel momento Adam sólo podía pensar que le habían robado a Hetty, y que se la había quitado a traición el hombre en quien más había confiado. Se situó pues frente a Arthur mirándole con ojos feroces, los labios descoloridos y los puños apretados, y el tono duro que antes se había esforzado para que no reflejara más que justa indignación, desapareció para dar paso a una voz ronca y temblorosa de rabia.

—¡No! Esto no se olvidará muy pronto, porque usted se ha interpuesto entre ella y yo, cuando ella podía haberme amado; no se olvidará en poco tiempo, porque me ha robado la felicidad, cuando yo le creía mi mejor amigo y hombre de nobles sentimientos, para quien me enorgullecía trabajar. ¿De modo que la ha besado sin dar importancia al asunto? Yo no la he besado en mi vida; pero en cambio he trabajado muchos años para tener el derecho de besarla. ¡Y habla de eso como si no tuviera ninguna importancia! Qué poco le preocupa lo que puede perjudicar a otros, siempre y cuando se divierta aun a costa de los demás. Le devuelvo todos sus favores, puesto que no es el hombre que me figuraba. Nunca más volveré a considerarle mi amigo. Preferiría tenerle por enemigo y luchando en contra de mis intereses. Eso es lo único que puede hacer.

Y el pobre Adam, que estaba poseído por la cólera, se quitó el gorro y la chaqueta, demasiado cegado por la pasión para advertir el cambio sufrido por Arthur mientras él hablaba. Los labios del caballero estaban tan pálidos como los suyos y su corazón latía con violencia. El descubrimiento de que Adam amaba a Hetty le hizo comprender su indignación y su sufrimiento, no sólo como una consecuencia de su falta, sino como un agravante de su error. Las palabras de odio y de desprecio —las primeras que oía en su vida— parecían saetas de fuego que le producían heridas incurables. Todos los razonamientos que habrían podido ocurrírsele en disculpa propia le abandonaron, y por un momento se vio ante el primer mal irrevocable que cometía en toda su vida. Sólo tenía veintiún años, y tres meses antes, y aun bastante después, había pensado con orgullo que nadie podía hacerle el menor reproche a su conducta. Su primer impulso, de haber tenido tiempo, habría consistido quizás en pronunciar palabras de disculpa. En cuanto a Adam, tras arrojar al suelo la gorra y la chaqueta, vio a Arthur de pie, pálido e inmóvil y con las manos todavía metidas en los bolsillos del chaleco.

—¡Cómo! —exclamó—. ¿No quiere luchar conmigo como un hombre? Ya sabe que no le atacaré mientras esté así.

—Vete, Adam —dijo Arthur—. No quiero luchar contigo.

—No —contestó Adam con amargura—. No quiere luchar conmigo… porque cree que soy vulgar, y que puede ultrajarme a su antojo.

—Nunca he querido ultrajarte —contestó Arthur encolerizado a su vez—. Ignoraba que tú la amabas.

—Pero ha hecho lo posible para que ella le ame a usted —replicó Adam—. Es un hombre de dos caras. Nunca más volveré a creer una sola de sus palabras.

—Vete, te digo —exclamó airado Arthur—, o nos arrepentiremos los dos.

—No —dijo Adam con voz convulsa—. Juro que no me iré sin luchar con usted. ¿Necesita que le provoque más? En tal caso, le diré que es un cobarde y que le desprecio.

Arthur volvió a sonrojarse; ciego de ira, apretó el puño derecho y, como un rayo, asestó un golpe a su contrario que le obligó a retroceder tambaleándose. Su sangre hervía, igual que la de Adam; los dos hombres, olvidando sus sentimientos del pasado, lucharon con la ferocidad instintiva de las panteras a la luz creciente del crepúsculo. El joven caballero de manos delicadas era un digno adversario del carpintero, salvo por la fuerza, y así, la habilidad de Arthur en parar los golpes le sirvió para prolongar la lucha unos momentos más. Pero cuando se combate sin armas, la victoria es para el más fuerte, siempre que éste no pierda la cabeza, de modo que Arthur tenía que acabar sucumbiendo a un buen golpe de Adam, igual que una barra de acero se rompe al recibir el golpe de otra de hierro. Pronto llegó aquel golpe; Arthur cayó y su cabeza quedó oculta por una mata de helechos; Adam sólo podía divisar su cuerpo vestido con un traje oscuro.

Se quedó inmóvil, a la pálida luz del crepúsculo, en espera de que Arthur se pusiera en pie. Por fin había asestado aquel golpe decisivo, en el que había concentrado todas sus fuerzas. ¿Y cuál era el resultado? ¿Qué había logrado? Sólo satisfacer su pasión y su ansia de venganza. No había conseguido salvar a Hetty, ni tampoco cambiar lo ocurrido. Todo estaba igual que antes. Adam no pudo sino deplorar la inutilidad de su

furor.

¿Pero por qué no se levantaba Arthur? Seguía completamente inmóvil y a Adam le parecía que el tiempo no pasaba. ¡Dios mío! ¿Habría golpeado demasiado fuerte? Adam se estremeció al pensar en su propia fuerza; se arrodilló junto a Arthur y le levantó la cabeza que reposaba entre los helechos. El caballero no daba señales de vida y tenía los ojos y los dientes apretados. El horror lo inundó por completo; Arthur tenía la muerte dibujada en el rostro y Adam no podía remediarlo. No hizo un solo movimiento y se quedó arrodillado como la imagen de la Desesperación contemplando a la de la Muerte.

XXVIII

UN DILEMA

Apenas habían pasado unos minutos, aunque a Adam le parecieron horas, cuando percibió un destello de vida en el rostro de Arthur, acompañado de un estremecimiento en su cuerpo. La intensa alegría que inundó su alma reavivó una parte de su antiguo afecto.

—¿Le duele algo, señor? —preguntó cariñosamente aflojando la corbata de Arthur, quien dirigió a Adam una mirada vaga y se sobresaltó al recobrar la memoria. No hubo respuesta.

—¿Le duele algo, señor? —repitió Adam con voz temblorosa. Arthur llevó la mano a los botones del chaleco, y en cuanto Adam los desabrochó dio un gran suspiro.

—Deja que repose la cabeza en el suelo —dijo débilmente—, y dame un poco de agua.

Adam dejó suavemente en el suelo la cabeza del caballero y vaciando el capazo de las herramientas, echó a correr hacia el extremo de la alameda en busca de un arroyo. Al volver con el capazo, que dejaba escapar el agua aunque todavía estaba medio lleno, Arthur le dirigió una mirada más despierta.

—¿Puede beber con la mano, señor? —preguntó Adam arrodillándose de nuevo para levantar la cabeza de Arthur.

—No —contestó éste—; mójame la cabeza.

El agua le fue muy bien, y finalmente pudo incorporarse apoyado en el brazo de Adam.

—¿Siente algún dolor en la cabeza, señor? —preguntó Adam.

—No, ninguno; pero no tengo fuerzas para nada. —Hizo una pausa y luego dijo—: Supongo que he perdido el sentido cuando me has dado un golpe y me he caído al suelo.

—Sí, señor. Y a Dios gracias no ha sido nada —contestó Adam—. Creía que habría sido peor.

—¿De modo que pensabas que me habías matado? Ven, ayúdame a ponerme en pie. Todo da vueltas a mi alrededor y apenas puedo andar —dijo Arthur mientras se apoyaba en el brazo de Adam—. Me has dado un puñetazo terrible. Creo que no soy capaz de andar solo.

—Apóyese en mí, señor. Yo le llevaré —dijo Adam—. ¿Prefiere estar un rato sentado sobre mi chaqueta? Yo le sostendré y es posible que se encuentre mejor dentro de un par de minutos.

—No —dijo Arthur—. Iré al Hermitage, allí hay un poco de licor. Estamos muy cerca de la puerta. Ayúdame a llegar allí.

Anduvieron despacio y descansando con frecuencia, pero sin cruzar palabra. Ambos pensaban en la escena que habían vivido unos momentos antes de que Arthur recobrara el sentido. En el estrecho sendero que corría por entre los árboles, era ya noche cerrada, pero el claro alrededor del Hermitage permitía a la luz de la luna atravesar las ventanas. Los pasos de los dos hombres, mitigados por la gruesa alfombra de agujas de abeto, no hacían ningún ruido, y la tranquilidad exterior parecía acentuar su preocupación. Arthur sacó la llave del bolsillo y la entregó a su compañero para que abriese la puerta. Este, que ignoraba que el caballero había amueblado el viejo Hermitage para convertirlo en un cómodo refugio, se quedó sorprendido al ver aquella habitación, que mostraba señales de ser visitada con frecuencia.

Arthur soltó el brazo de Adam y se sentó en la otomana.

—Por ahí encontrarás mi cantimplora —dijo—. Es un estuche de piel con una botella y un vaso.

Adam no tardó mucho en encontrarlo.

—Hay muy poco licor en la cantimplora, señor —dijo vertiendo el líquido en el vaso y mirándolo al trasluz—. Apenas hay suficiente para llenar este vasito.

—Bueno, dámelo —dijo Arthur aún muy abatido.

En cuanto hubo tomado algunos sorbos, Adam añadió:

—Si quiere puedo ir en busca de más licor. Volveré muy pronto. Le sería muy difícil volver a casa si no toma un buen licor.

—Sí, ve; pero no cuentes a nadie que estoy mal. Pregunta por mi criado Pym, y dile que se lo pida a Mills, y no digas que estoy en el Hermitage. Trae también un poco de agua.

Para Adam fue un alivio tener algo que hacer y ambos se separaron con satisfacción, aunque fuese por poco tiempo. Pero su apresuramiento no le impidió a Adam revivir el dolor de las últimas horas, y tampoco le evitó pensar en el triste futuro que le aguardaba.

Después de la salida de Adam, Arthur permaneció inmóvil durante unos minutos; luego se levantó débilmente de la otomana y buscó algo por la estancia iluminada por la luz de luna. Era un cabo de vela de cera que estaba en el batiburrillo de artículos de escritorio y de dibujo. Luego buscó el medio de encenderla, y en cuanto lo hubo logrado, registró con cuidado la habitación, como si quisiera cerciorarse de que no había nadie. Por fin encontró un pequeño objeto que se metió en el bolsillo; pero lo pensó mejor y lo arrojó al cesto de los papeles. Era un pañuelo femenino de seda roja. Puso la vela sobre la mesa y volvió a tenderse en la otomana, fatigado por el esfuerzo.

Cuando volvió Adam, al entrar despertó a Arthur del sopor en que estaba sumido.

—Muy bien —dijo Arthur—. Necesito tomar un cordial.

—Me alegro mucho de que haya encendido la luz —dijo Adam—; estuve tentado de pedir una linterna.

—No, no; la vela durará bastante y pronto podré regresar.

—No quisiera marcharme antes de dejarle en casa, señor —dijo Adam con tono inseguro.

—No, mejor será que te quedes. Siéntate.

Adam se sentó y se quedaron frente a frente, guardando un silencio violento, mientras Arthur bebía con lentitud algunos tragos de coñac y de agua, visiblemente aliviado; su postura era más cómoda y parecía menos dominado por las sensaciones físicas; Adam observaba con atención estas señales y empezaba a tranquilizarse con respecto al estado de Arthur; en cambio, aumentaba la impaciencia propia del que ha suspendido la indignación al ver el mal estado físico en que se halla el culpable. Sin embargo, antes de expresar su enfado con palabras, debía confesar la injusticia de sus insultos. Tal vez deseaba hacer cuanto antes esta confesión para quedar en libertad de indignarse de nuevo. Y, a medida que observaba la mejoría de Arthur, sentía la tentación de hablar, aunque finalmente se dijo que sería más conveniente dejarlo para el siguiente día. Mientras guardaron silencio, los dos jóvenes no se miraron, y Adam tuvo el presentimiento de que si volvían a hablar del asunto y se miraban cara a cara se encolerizarían otra vez. Continuaron callados hasta que la llama de la vela empezó a parpadear en su soporte; el silencio era cada vez más incómodo para Adam. Arthur tomó otro vaso de agua y coñac, se puso el brazo debajo de la cabeza y encogió una pierna para adoptar una postura más cómoda. Eso dio a Adam la tentación de hablar.

—¿Se encuentra mejor, señor? —dijo cuando se apagó la vela y ambos quedaron ocultos por la oscuridad, que apenas suavizaba la luz de la luna.

—Sí, estoy mucho mejor. No tengo ganas de moverme pero en cuanto me haya bebido esto, volveré a casa.

Hubo una ligera pausa antes de que Adam añadiera:

—He perdido el dominio de mí mismo y he dicho cosas que no son ciertas. Yo no tenía ninguna razón para hablar como si usted me hubiese injuriado. Usted no tenía ningún motivo para sospecharlo, puesto que yo siempre he mantenido en secreto mis sentimientos hacia ella. —Hizo una nueva pausa, y luego siguió diciendo—: Es posible que le haya juzgado con demasiada severidad, pues, a mi pesar, a veces soy muy duro; pero también creo que su conducta es resultado de la frivolidad, una frivolidad mayor de la que yo creí posible en un hombre de corazón y de conciencia. Usted y yo no somos semejantes, y podemos mostrarnos imprudentes en nuestros juicios. Dios sabe que mi mayor alegría sería pensar mejor sobre usted.

Arthur sólo deseaba irse a casa sin decir nada más, pues tenía la mente demasiado turbada y el cuerpo muy débil para volver a tratar del asunto aquella noche. Sin embargo, se alegró de que Adam se refiriese otra vez a la cuestión de un modo que le facilitaba la réplica. Arthur se hallaba en la desagradable situación de un hombre franco y generoso que ha cometido un error y se ve obligado a engañar. No tenía más remedio que frenar su impulso de contestar a la verdad con la sinceridad y a la confianza con la franqueza, de modo que su deber se había convertido en una cuestión de táctica. Sus actos actuaban sobre él y le gobernaban con terrible tiranía, obligándole a seguir una conducta que pugnaba con sus sentimientos normales. Lo único que podía hacer era engañar a Adam cuanto pudiera, para que pensara de él mejor de lo que merecía. Y cuando oyó las palabras de honrada retractación y la triste declaración de Adam, se vio obligado a alegrarse de los restos de confianza ignorante que aquello ponía al descubierto. Y si no contestó

en el acto, fue por la necesidad que experimentaba de actuar con cautela.

—No hables más de cólera, Adam —dijo con voz desfallecida pues le costaba mucho hablar—. Perdono tu injusticia momentánea, muy natural en ti dadas las opiniones exageradas que sostienes. Espero que no por haber luchado seamos menos amigos en el futuro. Has llevado la ventaja, cosa muy justa, porque yo fui el más culpable de los dos. Y ahora, démonos la mano.

Y Arthur tendió la suya, pero Adam continuó inmóvil.

—No es que me niegue a ello, señor; pero no puedo estrecharle la mano hasta que hayamos aclarado como es debido algunos puntos. Hice mal al hablar como si me hubiese injuriado a sabiendas, pero no en lo que le dije sobre su conducta con Hetty. No puedo estrecharle la mano como si fuésemos tan amigos como antes, pues para eso será preciso que se justifique por completo.

Arthur no tuvo más remedio que tragarse el orgullo y el resentimiento al retirar su mano. Se quedó silencioso unos instantes, y luego dijo con toda la indiferencia que le fue posible:

—No sé qué quieres decir con eso de justificarme, Adam. Ya te he dicho que te tomas demasiado en serio lo que no es más que un ligero flirteo. Pero si tienes razón al suponer que eso envuelve algún peligro, piensa en que me iré el sábado y que el asunto terminará aquí. En cuanto al dolor que esto te haya causado, lo siento con toda el alma. Más no puedo decir.

Adam no contestó, pero se puso en pie y volvió la cara hacia una de las ventanas como si contemplase la negrura de los abetos. En realidad no pensaba en otra cosa que en el conflicto que se desarrollaba en su interior. Su resolución de no volver a hablar del asunto hasta el día siguiente era inútil; debían hacerlo enseguida. Trascurrieron varios minutos antes de que se volviese y se aproximara a donde estaba Arthur. Luego se quedó de pie y le contempló desde su altura.

—Mejor será que hable claro —dijo con evidente esfuerzo—, aunque resulte duro. Para mí, señor, este asunto no es insignificante, como tal vez lo es para usted. Yo no soy uno de esos hombres capaces de hacer el amor a una mujer y luego a otra, sin preocuparse del perjuicio que pueda causarles. Lo que siento por Hetty es un amor distinto, que quizás nadie puede imaginarse. Después de mi conciencia y de mi buen nombre, ella lo es todo para mí. Y si es cierto lo que ha dicho, de que lo ocurrido no fue más que un juego que terminará con su marcha, en tal caso puedo esperar y confiar en que, al fin, su corazón se interese por mí. No me atrevo a creer que me engaña y, a pesar de las apariencias, estoy dispuesto a prestar fe a sus palabras.

—Si no me creyeses, más perjuicio harías a Hetty que a mí —replicó Arthur con violencia, poniéndose en pie y dando algunos pasos. Pero fue a sentarse en una silla y, con voz más débil, añadió—: Al parecer, olvidas que al sospechar de mí la estás insultando a ella.

—No, señor —dijo Adam con voz tranquila, como aliviado en parte, ya que era demasiado sincero para distinguir entre la falsedad directa y la indirecta—. No, señor; las cosas no están claras entre Hetty y usted. Usted obra con conocimiento de causa, haga lo que haga; pero ¿cómo sabe lo que hay en la mente de Hetty? No es más que una niña y cualquier hombre de conciencia debería desear cuidarla. Por eso y a pesar de lo que pueda creer, opino que ha alterado la paz de su mente y que ella le ha entregado su corazón; y hablo así porque ahora veo con claridad muchas cosas que antes no comprendía. Usted, en cambio, no da ninguna importancia a lo que ella pueda sentir y ni siquiera se preocupa por eso.

—Dios mío, Adam, déjame en paz —exclamó Arthur impetuosamente—. Lo sé de sobra, no hace falta que me atormentes. —Apenas hubo pronunciado estas palabras, advirtió su improcedencia.

—Pues bien, ya que lo comprende —exclamó Adam—, si advierte las ideas nocivas que le ha infundido, dándole a entender que la ama, cuando en realidad no es así, he de hacerle una petición, y conste que no hablo por mí mismo, sino en beneficio de ella. Le ruego que la desengañe antes de marcharse. Piense que no se marcha para siempre, y que si la deja con esas falsas ideas acerca de sus sentimientos, es decir, en la creencia de que la quiere como ella le quiere a usted, no hará más que desear su regreso y el mal será todavía más grave. Es probable que si la desengaña ahora, la pobrecilla tenga un gran disgusto, pero, al fin y al cabo, eso le ahorrará otras penas mayores. Le ruego que le escriba una carta y yo cuidaré de que la reciba; dígale la verdad y asuma toda la culpa por haberse portado como no tenía derecho a hacerlo con una mujer que no es su igual. Le hablo claro, señor, pues no puedo hacerlo de otro modo. En este asunto nadie más que yo puede cuidar de Hetty.

—Haré lo que considere más apropiado —dijo Arthur cada vez más irritado y perplejo—, y no pienso prometerle nada. Tomaré las medidas que considere convenientes.

—No —replicó Adam en tono brusco y decidido—. No me basta. Quiero conocer el terreno que piso y estar seguro de que pone fin a una situación que no debería haber comenzado. No olvido el respeto que le debo como caballero; pero en este asunto soy tan hombre como usted y no puedo desistir de mi empeño.

Por unos momentos guardaron silencio y finalmente Arthur dijo:

—Te veré mañana. Hoy no tengo fuerzas para más, me siento enfermo.

Mientras hablaba, se levantó y cogió la gorra, como si se dispusiera a marcharse.

—¡No volverá a verla! —exclamó Adam, de nuevo presa de la cólera y del recelo, yendo hacia la puerta y apoyando la espalda en ella—. Dígame que no puede ser mi esposa, que ha estado mintiendo, o, de lo contrario, prométame que hará lo que le he pedido.

Al proponer esta alternativa, Adam parecía la personificación de un terrible destino para Arthur, quien dio un par de pasos y luego se detuvo, débil, tembloroso y enfermo de cuerpo y alma. La lucha que Arthur libraba en su interior se les hizo muy larga a los dos hombres y, por fin, el joven caballero replicó débilmente:

—Te lo prometo. Déjame marchar.

Adam se separó de la puerta y la abrió; cuando Arthur llegó al primer escalón, volvió a detenerse y se apoyó en la jamba.

—No está bastante fuerte para ir solo, señor. Tome de nuevo mi brazo.

Arthur no contestó y siguió andando seguido por Adam. Pero después de algunos pasos se detuvo otra vez y dijo fríamente:

—Creo que tendré que molestarte. Ya es tarde y puede que en casa se inquieten por mí.

Adam le tendió el brazo y siguieron andando sin pronunciar palabra hasta llegar al lugar en que estaban el capazo y las herramientas.

—Debo recoger las herramientas, señor —dijo Adam—. Son de mi hermano y temo que se oxiden. Le ruego que espere un minuto.

Arthur se detuvo en silencio y no volvieron a cruzar palabra hasta llegar a la puerta lateral de la casa, por la que el caballero esperaba poder entrar sin ser visto. Entonces se volvió a su compañero y le dijo:

—Gracias. No necesito molestarte más.

—¿Qué hora le parece más apropiada para que venga a verle mañana, señor? —preguntó Adam.

—Mándame aviso mañana por la tarde, a las cinco. No antes.

—Buenas noches, señor —contestó Adam.

Pero no hubo respuesta, pues Arthur había entrado ya en la casa.

XXIX

A La mañana siguiente

Arthur no pasó la noche en vela, sino que durmió bien y durante muchas horas. Pero a las siete tiró de la campanilla y asombró a Pym declarando que iba a levantarse y que a las ocho en punto quería desayunar.

—Procura también que esté ensillada mi yegua a las ocho y media, y cuando baje mi abuelo dile que esta mañana estoy mucho mejor, y que he salido a dar un paseo.

Hacía ya una hora que estaba despierto y no tuvo paciencia para permanecer más tiempo en la cama. En el lecho, el día de ayer es siempre opresivo. Y un hombre que puede levantarse, aunque no sea más que para silbar o para fumar, tiene ya un presente que ofrece alguna resistencia al pasado y sensaciones que se oponen a los recuerdos tiránicos. Arthur se dijo que un paseo a caballo acabaría de entonarle. Hasta la presencia de Pym, que le atendía con la deferencia habitual, era algo agradable para él después de las escenas del día anterior. El hecho de haber perdido el respeto de Adam era una herida en su autoestima que le infundía la sensación de haber perdido la dignidad a los ojos de todos, igual que el sobresalto producido por un peligro real asusta a la mujer nerviosa, impidiéndole incluso andar pues todas sus percepciones se confunden con la sensación del peligro.

Como ya sabemos, Arthur tenía una naturaleza afectuosa. Los actos de bondad eran para él tan fáciles como una mala costumbre; eran la exteriorización habitual de su debilidad y de sus buenas cualidades, de su egoísmo y de su simpatía. No le gustaba ser testigo del dolor y, en cambio, quería ser mirado por ojos agradecidos, como dispensador del placer. Cuando tenía siete años dio un día un puntapié a un cuenco de caldo del jardinero, sin otro motivo que el placer de darlo y sin fijarse en que aquello contenía la comida del anciano; pero al enterarse de tan triste hecho, sacó del bolsillo su caja de lápices preferida y un cuchillo de mango de plata y se los ofreció como compensación. Desde entonces fue siempre así, deseoso de hacer olvidar cualquier ofensa mediante una compensación. Si en su naturaleza había alguna amargura, sólo podía sentirla contra quien no quisiera reconciliarse con él. Y quizás había llegado el momento de sentir esa amargura. En el primer momento experimentó dolor y remordimiento al descubrir que la felicidad de Adam dependía de sus relaciones con Hetty. De haber existido la posibilidad de dar a Adam una compensación diez veces mayor, o si un regalo o algo semejante hubiese devuelto a Adam la alegría y la posibilidad de seguir considerando a Arthur como un bienhechor, no hay duda de que éste se habría apresurado a dejarle satisfecho sin vacilar un momento, y hasta se sentiría más inclinado a él, sin cansarse nunca de indemnizarle. Pero Adam no podía aceptar compensación alguna; sus sufrimientos no podían ser borrados de ese modo, y ninguna recompensa habría sido capaz de devolverle el respeto y el afecto que sentía por Arthur. Era un obstáculo inamovible contra el cual no servía ninguna presión: la personificación de lo irrevocable de la falta de Arthur, cosa que a éste llegaba a asustarle verdaderamente. Las palabras de desdén, su negativa a estrecharle la mano, el dominio que ejerció sobre él en la última conversación en el Hermitage y, sobre todo, la convicción de haber sido derribado, cosas con las cuales un hombre no llega a reconciliarse ni siquiera en las circunstancias más heroicas, le oprimían produciéndole un dolor inaguantable, mucho más molesto que el mismo arrepentimiento. Arthur se había persuadido de que no había hecho ningún mal. Y si nadie le hubiese dicho lo contrario, más rápido habría sido su convencimiento. Nuestro sentido moral aprende las maneras de la buena sociedad y sonríe cuando sonríen los demás; pero si alguna persona ruda califica con rudeza nuestras acciones, nada le cuesta sumarse al bando de nuestros contrarios. Y así le ocurría a Arthur: el juicio de Adam sobre él y las palabras violentas del joven desarmaban los argumentos que él mismo elaboraba con objeto de calmarse.

No debe entenderse por eso que Arthur había estado en paz consigo mismo antes del descubrimiento de Adam. Las luchas y las resoluciones se habían transformado en convulsión y en ansiedad. Estaba desesperado por Hetty y por sí mismo de tener que abandonarla. Tanto cuando adoptaba alguna decisión como cuando faltaba a ellas, siempre miró más allá de su pasión sabiendo que terminaría con la separación; pero su naturaleza era demasiado tierna y ardiente para no sufrir en el acto de la despedida. Y en cuanto a Hetty, se sentía totalmente angustiado. Había descubierto el sueño en que vivía la joven en espera de convertirse en una dama vestida de sedas y de satenes. Y cuando por primera vez él le habló de su marcha, ella le rogó, temblorosa, que le permitiese huir con él para casarse. El recuerdo de aquella escena fue lo que más le dolió cuando oyó los reproches de Adam. Él nunca había pronunciado una sola palabra para engañarla; la joven había tejido ese sueño con su propia fantasía infantil; pero tuvo que confesarse que él la había ayudado con sus propios actos. Y, para aumentar el engaño, aquella última tarde no se atrevió a insinuar la verdad a Hetty. Se vio obligado a calmarla con tiernas palabras de esperanza para no sumirla en una violenta desesperación. Se daba perfecta cuenta de la situación; comprendía el dolor de la querida niña en aquellos momentos, y, no sin ansiedad, pensó en lo tenaces que podrían ser sus sentimientos en lo venidero. Esto era lo único que le inquietaba, pues todo lo demás podría eludirlo persuadiéndose a sí mismo. Todo aquel asunto era un secreto, pues los Poyser no tenían la menor sospecha. Nadie, excepto Adam, conocía lo ocurrido y tampoco nadie había de saberlo, pues Arthur había dado a entender a Hetty que resultaría fatal descubrir, por medio de las miradas o de las palabras, que existía alguna intimidad entre ellos. Y Adam, que conocía la mitad de su secreto, más bien contribuiría a guardarlo que a traicionarlo. Era un asunto desgraciado, sin duda alguna, pero no había necesidad de empeorarlo con exageraciones imaginarias y presentimientos funestos de lo que, probablemente, no llegaría nunca. Hetty quizás pasaría algunos apuros por otra causa, en otra ocasión. Y acaso más tarde podría hacer mucho por ella y compensarle todas las lágrimas que ahora derramase por él. En lo futuro, ella disfrutaría de las ventajas de su cariño a cambio del dolor que ahora sufría. Así es como el bien puede ser una consecuencia del mal. ¡Y qué modo más bonito de arreglar las cosas!

Tal vez el lector se pregunte cómo puede ser éste el mismo Arthur que, dos meses atrás, tenía aquellos sentimientos tan puros, aquel honor delicado que retrocedía ante la posibilidad de herir un sentimiento, que no se consideraba capaz de algo más importante que eso, y que, por otra parte, creía que su propia autoestima era un tribunal mucho más alto que la opinión de los demás. Sin duda alguna era el mismo, aunque en condiciones distintas. Nuestros actos nos determinan tanto a nosotros como nosotros a ellos; y hasta que no sepamos cuáles han sido o serán las combinaciones particulares de los hechos exteriores e interiores que constituyen las acciones críticas de un hombre, mejor será que no nos creamos conocedores de su carácter. En todos los actos hay una terrible coerción que puede convertir, primero, a un hombre honrado en un embustero, y luego reconciliarlo consigo mismo. A esta razón se debe el hecho de que la segunda falta se presentase a él como el único bien practicable. La acción que, antes de la comisión de una falta cualquiera, ha sido vista de acuerdo con el sentido común y con un sentimiento puro, que constituye la salud del alma, se examina luego con ingeniosidad apologética, mediante la cual todas las cosas que los hombres llaman hermosas y feas parecen estar constituidas por tejidos muy semejantes. Europa se ajusta a sí misma a un *fait accompli* y lo mismo hace un personaje particular…, hasta que tal ajuste plácido se ve turbado por una consecuencia convulsiva.

No hay hombre capaz de evitar este efecto viciador de una falta contra sus propios sentimientos de rectitud, y el efecto fue mucho más fuerte en Arthur a causa de su necesidad de autoestima, que, mientras su conciencia estaba en paz, era una de sus mejores salvaguardias. El acusarse a sí mismo era demasiado penoso para él, y no se atrevía a pensar siquiera en ello. Tenía necesidad de persuadirse de que no merecía demasiadas censuras; incluso empezó a compadecerse de sí mismo por la necesidad de engañar a Adam; ése era un recurso opuesto a la sinceridad de su naturaleza, pero también lo único que podía hacer.

En fin, cualquiera que fuese el cambio que en él se hubiese operado, lo cierto es que era muy desgraciado; no sólo con respecto a Hetty, sino también a causa de la carta que prometió escribir y que ahora le parecía una barbaridad enorme, aunque un momento más tarde la consideraba como el mayor acto de bondad que podía realizar en beneficio de la joven. Y en medio de estas reflexiones sentía, de vez en cuando, el repentino impulso de huir con Hetty, a despecho de todas las demás consideraciones.

En tal estado mental, las cuatro paredes de su habitación le parecían una cárcel intolerable. Le daban la sensación de que lanzaban sobre él una legión de pensamientos y emociones contradictorios, algunos de los cuales, tal vez, desaparecerían al aire libre. Sólo le quedaban una o dos horas para decidirse y, por consiguiente, había de tranquilizarse y poner alguna claridad en sus ideas. Una vez a lomos de Meg y recibiendo el aire fresco de aquella hermosa mañana, sería mucho más dueño de la situación.

El hermoso animal arqueó su cuello a la luz del sol, rascó la grava con el casco y se estremeció de placer cuando su amo le acarició el hocico y le dio algunas palmadas, dirigiéndole palabras más cariñosas que de costumbre. El joven sentía más afecto por el animal a causa de que éste ignoraba sus secretos.

Arthur hizo trotar a su montura durante ocho kilómetros más allá del cazadero, hasta que hubo llegado al pie de una montaña, donde no había setos o árboles que bordearan el camino. Entonces dejó la brida sobre el cuello de Meg y se dispuso a tomar una decisión.

Hetty sabía ya que su entrevista del día anterior iba a ser la última antes de la marcha de Arthur. No cabía pues la posibilidad de convenir otra sin despertar sospechas. Ella parecía una niña asustada incapaz de pensar en nada; al oír hablar de separación, se echaba a llorar y levantaba luego el rostro para que, a fuerza de besos, se secaran sus lágrimas. Y, como es lógico, él no podía hacer más que consolarla y dejarla sumida en sus sueños. Una carta constituiría un despertar terrible para la joven. Sin embargo, era cierto lo que dijo Adam: eso le evitaría un largo engaño, mucho peor que un dolor momentáneo e inmediato… Además, era el único modo de contentar a Adam, a quien era preciso complacer por más de una razón. ¡Si él hubiese podido verla otra vez! Pero era imposible. Entre ambos se extendía un seto espinoso de inconvenientes, y una imprudencia en ese momento sería fatal. Y aun cuando pudiera verla de nuevo ¿qué bien resultaría de eso? Sólo aumentar el dolor al ser testigo de la pena de la joven, que, luego, haría más penoso su recuerdo. En cambio, lejos de él, Hetty tendría motivos suficientes para dominarse.

Tuvo entonces un temor repentino que ensombreció sus pensamientos: que Hetty, en su dolor, pudiese apelar a alguna medida violenta; y después de aquel temor llegó otro que acentuó la sombra; pero se los sacudió con la fuerza de la juventud y de la esperanza. ¿Qué razones tenía para pintar tan negro el porvenir? Las mismas que para obrar en sentido contrario. Se dijo también que no merecía que las cosas tomasen mal camino; jamás había actuado mal a sabiendas y contra los dictados de su conciencia, y en este caso había sido guiado por las circunstancias. Y en él existía una confianza implícita de ser, en el fondo, un buen muchacho, y de que la Providencia no le trataría mal.

De todos modos, no evitaría lo que viniese; lo único que podía hacer por el momento era facilitar el entendimiento entre Adam y Hetty. Quizás el corazón de ésta se inclinaría hacia Adam, según el joven le había indicado; en tal caso el daño no sería muy grande, puesto que el más ardiente deseo de aquél era casarse con Hetty. En realidad, Adam era un hombre engañado, y de un modo que a Arthur le habría parecido un grave insulto de ser él la víctima. Esta era una reflexión que invalidaba la esperanza consoladora, y las mejillas de Arthur ardieron de vergüenza y de irritación al pensar en ello. Pero ¿qué podría hacer un hombre ante tal dilema? El honor le mandaba no pronunciar una sola palabra que pudiese injuriar a Hetty. Su primer deber era protegerla. Jamás habría dicho ni permitido que se creyese una mentira con respecto a él mismo. Y, sin embargo, si existían disculpas para el proceder de un hombre, sin duda alguna él las tenía todas. (Es una lástima que las consecuencias no estén determinadas por las excusas sino por las acciones).

En fin, era preciso escribir la carta, pues era el único medio que prometía una salida. Los ojos de Arthur se llenaron de lágrimas al imaginar a Hetty en el momento de leerla; pero para él sería igualmente duro escribirla. No haría nada que le pareciese fácil, y este último pensamiento le ayudó a llegar a una conclusión. Nunca habría podido tomar deliberadamente una decisión que causara dolor a otro, quedándose él tranquilo por completo. Hasta un rapto de celos, al pensar en que iba a entregar a Hetty a Adam, acabó de convencerle de que llevaba a cabo un sacrificio.

Una vez hubo llegado a esta conclusión, hizo dar media vuelta a Meg y al trote regresó a su casa. Ante todo, era preciso escribir la carta, y dedicaría el resto del día a otros asuntos, pues así no tendría tiempo de pensar en su propio drama. Por suerte, Irwine y Gawaine irían a cenar con él, y a las doce del siguiente día el cazadero estaría ya a muchos kilómetros de distancia. Pensar en esas ocupaciones constantes le proporcionaba cierta seguridad contra el indomable impulso de ir en busca de Hetty para hacerle alguna loca proposición que anulase todo lo anterior. La sensible Meg corría cada vez más deprisa, obedeciendo a los ligeros movimientos de su jinete, hasta que el trote se convirtió en un rápido galope.

—Creí que el señor estaba enfermo ayer noche —dijo el viejo John, el caballerizo, mientras comía con los demás criados—. Esta mañana, en cambio, ha estado a punto de reventar la yegua.

—A veces esto es un buen síntoma, John —observó el bromista cochero.

—Pues en tal caso podría tener un poco de compasión por el pobre animal —replicó John malhumorado.

Adam acudió temprano al cazadero para enterarse del estado de Arthur y se tranquilizó al saber que había salido a dar un paseo a caballo. A las cinco de la tarde regresó con puntualidad y le mandó aviso de su llegada. Pocos minutos después compareció Pym llevando una carta en la mano, que entregó a Adam diciéndole que el capitán estaba demasiado ocupado para recibirle y que había escrito cuanto tenía que

decirle. La carta estaba dirigida a Adam, quien se abstuvo de abrirla hasta después de haber salido. Contenía un pliego sellado y dirigido a Hetty. En el interior de la cubierta, Adam leyó:

En la carta adjunta he escrito lo que deseabas. Te dejo en libertad de decidir si harás bien entregándola a Hetty o devolviéndomela. Pregúntate, una vez más, si no darás un paso que le pueda causar mayor dolor que el silencio.

No hay necesidad de que volvamos a vemos ahora. Dentro de algunos meses nos encontraremos, a buen seguro, en mejores condiciones.

A. D.

«Tal vez tiene razón en no querer verme —pensó Adam—. No hay ninguna necesidad de que crucemos palabras desagradables, y tampoco serviría de nada que nos diésemos la mano, diciéndonos que volvemos a ser amigos. No nos une ya la amistad, y es mejor no fingir.

Comprendo que el perdón es un deber del hombre, pero a mi juicio eso no significa sino que se está dispuesto a abandonar toda idea de venganza; nunca puede indicar que se tienen los mismos sentimientos que antes, pues eso es imposible. Él ya no es el mismo hombre para mí; es como si hubiese medido mi trabajo desde un punto de partida falso y tuviese que repetir la operación».

Pero el problema de la entrega de la carta absorbió pronto todos sus pensamientos. Arthur se había quedado tranquilo dejando que Adam tomase esta decisión después de avisarle; y Adam, que no era hombre dado a la indecisión, vaciló entonces. Tomó, por fin, la resolución de adoptar algunas precauciones que le indicasen lo que convenía hacer, averiguando, en cuanto le fuese posible, el estado de ánimo de Hetty antes de decidirse.

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La entrega de la carta

Al domingo siguiente, Adam se reunió con los Poyser a la salida de la iglesia, esperando que le invitarían a acompañarles a casa. Llevaba la carta en el bolsillo y deseaba tener una oportunidad de hablar con Hetty a solas. En la iglesia no le había podido ver el rostro, porque ella cambió de asiento, y cuando él se acercó para darle la mano, notó que estaba muy pensativa y reservada. Lo esperaba, pues era la primera vez que la veía después de haberla sorprendido con Arthur en la alameda.

—Venga con nosotros, Adam —dijo el señor Poyser en cuanto llegaron a la primera curva del camino.

Cuando estuvieron en los campos, Adam se atrevió a ofrecer el brazo a Hetty. Los niños pronto les dieron una oportunidad para quedarse algo atrás, y entonces el joven dijo:

—¿Quiere hacerme el favor de salir a dar un paseo conmigo por el jardín esta tarde si hace buen tiempo, Hetty? Tengo que decirle algo.

—Muy bien —contestó la joven, que deseaba tanto como él tener una conversación particular.

Hetty se preguntaba lo que Adam pensaría de ella y de Arthur. Sin duda les había visto besarse; no cabía ninguna duda; pero no sabía nada de la escena posterior. Su primera idea fue pensar que Adam estaría enfadado con ella y que referiría lo ocurrido a sus tíos, pero nunca imaginó siquiera que Adam se atrevería a decir una palabra al capitán Donnithorne. Le alivió su conducta bondadosa, y también su petición de hablar a solas con ella, porque al verle con sus tíos temió que les refiriese lo sucedido. Pero ya que deseaba conversar con ella particularmente, podría averiguar lo que pensaba y lo que se proponía hacer. Pensaba persuadirlo de que no hiciese nada en contra de ella; incluso podría, quizás, darle a entender que no quería a Arthur, y era muy probable que mientras Adam tuviese alguna esperanza de conquistarla haría lo que ella le pidiese. Además, debía continuar alentándole para que no se enfadasen sus tíos y no sospechasen que tenía un amante secreto.

El pequeño cerebro de Hetty urdía esta combinación mientras iba cogida del brazo de Adam, y contestaba «sí» o «no» a las ligeras observaciones que él hacía sobre las muchas acerolas que tendrían los pájaros en el próximo invierno y de las bajas nubes que, con dificultad, durarían hasta la mañana siguiente. Y cuando se reunieron con sus tíos, la joven pudo seguir entregada a sus reflexiones sin que la interrumpiese nadie, porque el señor Poyser sostuvo que, aunque a un joven le pudiera gustar llevar del brazo a la joven a quien cortejaba, no por eso dejaría de parecerle bien un poco de charla sobre negocios, y, por su parte, sentía curiosidad de enterarse de las noticias más recientes de la granja del cazadero. Así, y durante el resto del paseo, monopolizó la conversación de Adam; y Hetty pudo elaborar sus pequeños planes mientras andaba por entre las matas cogida del brazo de Adam, imaginando algunas escenas en que daría muestras de su astucia como si fuese una coqueta elegantemente vestida que estuviese sola en su *boudoir*. Porque si una belleza rústica de gruesos zapatones tiene un disgusto, resulta asombroso ver cuánto se parecen sus procesos mentales a los de una dama de la buena sociedad que aplique su refinada inteligencia al problema de cometer algunas indiscreciones sin comprometerse en lo más mínimo.

Quizás la comparación no era tanto, ya que Hetty se sentía muy desgraciada. La despedida de Arthur constituía para ella un doble dolor, pues confundido con el tumulto de la pasión y de la vanidad siempre tenía el vago e indefinido temor de que el porvenir pudiese ser muy distinto de sus sueños. Se repetía las consoladoras palabras que Arthur pronunció en su última entrevista: «Volveré por Navidad y entonces veremos lo que puede hacerse». Se apoyaba en la creencia de que él la quería tanto que nunca sería feliz sin ella; y continuaba guardando su secreto: el de que un gran caballero la amaba. Y eso le infundía gran

orgullo y le daba cierta superioridad sobre todas las muchachas que conocía. Pero la inseguridad del futuro, las posibilidades a las que no podía dar forma empezaron a pesar sobre ella como el aire invisible.

Se veía sola en su pequeña isla de sueños y a su alrededor estaban las aguas negras y desconocidas por las que se había alejado Arthur. Al mirar hacia adelante no podía animarse, sino que se veía obligada a contemplar el pasado para construir sus esperanzas en palabras y caricias pretéritas; pero desde el jueves por la tarde sus confusas ansiedades habían quedado casi olvidadas ante el miedo más concreto de que Adam pudiese revelar a sus tíos lo que sabía, de modo que la inesperada proposición de éste de hablar con ella a solas hizo que sus pensamientos tomasen otra dirección. Deseaba no perder la oportunidad de aquella tarde, y así, después de tomar el té, y cuando los niños salieron al jardín y Totty quiso acompañarles, Hetty, con una rapidez que sorprendió a la señora Poyser, exclamó:

—Yo iré con ella, tía.

A nadie le extrañó que Adam se dispusiera a salir a su vez, y muy pronto él y Hetty estaban solos y juntos en el sendero bordeado de avellanos, mientras los niños se mantenían ocupados cogiendo grandes nueces verdes para jugar, y Totty los contemplaba embelesada con la expresión propia de un cachorro. Hacía muy poco tiempo, apenas dos meses, que Adam, con la mente llena de deliciosas esperanzas, había estado en aquel mismo jardín junto a Hetty. Desde el último jueves había recordado a menudo aquella escena: la luz del sol atravesando las ramas de los manzanos; las grosellas y el dulce rubor de Hetty. Y aquel recuerdo le importunó también en la triste tarde nebulosa, pero él se esforzó en olvidarlo para que la emoción no le hiciese hablar más de lo que convenía a Hetty.

—Después de lo que vi el jueves por la tarde, Hetty —empezó a decir—, espero que no me querrá mal por lo que tengo que comunicarle. Si le hubiese cortejado un hombre que pudiera hacerla su mujer y yo supiera que usted le quería y deseaba casarse con él, no tendría el menor derecho de pronunciar una palabra sobre el asunto. Pero como veo que le hace el amor un caballero que nunca se casará con usted, puesto que ni siquiera piensa en ello, me veo obligado a intervenir por su bien. Hablaré, pues, de eso, sustituyendo a sus padres, porque de este asunto podrían resultar considerables daños.

Las palabras de Adam aliviaron uno de los temores da Hetty, pero también acentuaron sus desagradables presentimientos. La joven estaba pálida y temblorosa, y, de no haber temido traicionar sus sentimientos, no hay duda de que hubiese contradicho a Adam. No obstante, guardó silencio.

—Es usted muy joven, Hetty —continuó él tiernamente—, y ha visto muy poco de lo que ocurre en el mundo. Me corresponde, pues, la obligación de hacer por usted cuanto pueda, con objeto de evitarle disgustos por no conocer el camino que sigue. Si alguien, además de yo mismo, supiera lo que yo sé sobre su encuentro con el joven caballero, no hay duda de que se lo contaría a todo el mundo y usted perdería su reputación. Además, tendrá que sufrir las consecuencias de haber entregado su amor a un hombre que nunca se casará con usted, y que no podrá cuidar de usted en toda su vida.

Adam hizo una pausa y miró a Hetty, que cogía maquinalmente unas hojas de los avellanos para romperlas luego entre sus manos. Con la terrible agitación que le producían las palabras de Adam, había olvidado sus pequeños planes y sus respuestas preconcebidas, como si se tratase de una lección mal aprendida. En la tranquila certeza que Adam mostraba había una fuerza cruel que amenazaba destruir las imprecisas esperanzas e ilusiones que ella se había forjado. Deseaba contradecirlo violentamente, pero se dejó dominar por la decisión de ocultar sus sentimientos. No podía hacer otra cosa que contestar a ciegas, porque era incapaz de calcular el efecto de sus palabras.

—¡No tiene derecho a decir que le quiero! —replicó con voz débil, aunque impetuosa, arrancando al mismo tiempo otra hoja que destrozó entre sus dedos.

Estaba muy hermosa en su palidez y agitación, con los ojos oscuros e infantiles muy abiertos y la respiración más agitada que de costumbre. Mientras la miraba, el corazón de Adam se sentía atraído hacia ella.

—No tengo más remedio que creerlo así, Hetty —dijo tiernamente—, porque no puedo imaginar que permitiese a un hombre besarla, regalarle un guardapelo con un mechón de su cabello, o que fuese a su encuentro en la alameda, y todo sin que usted le amara. No la censuro; ya sé que estas cosas empiezan del modo más natural del mundo y sin que tengan ninguna importancia, hasta que al final uno se encuentra comprometido y sin saber cómo liberarse. A él es a quien debo censurar por haberle arrebatado su amor de esta manera, cuando de sobra le constaba que no podría darle la debida compensación. Ha estado jugando con usted y sin corresponderla con los sentimientos que un hombre debería haberle demostrado.

—Pues él me quiere y lo sé mejor que usted —replicó Hetty, quien ya había olvidado todo salvo el dolor y la ira que le causaban las palabras de Adam.

—No, Hetty —replicó éste—. Si la quisiera de veras, nunca se habría portado de ese modo. Él mismo me

dijo que el haberla besado y hecho algunos regalos carecía de toda importancia, y quiso darme a entender que usted opinaba de la misma manera acerca del particular. Pero yo sé que no es cierto, y no puedo dejar de pensar que usted ha confiado en su amor esperando que la querría lo bastante para casarse con usted a pesar de su condición de caballero. Y por eso debo hablarle del asunto, Hetty, por miedo de que se engañe usted misma. Le aseguro que nunca entró en su cabeza la idea de tomarla por esposa.

—¿Y cómo lo sabe? ¿Cómo se atreve a asegurarlo? —exclamó Hetty temblando de pies a cabeza.

La firmeza con que hablaba Adam le infundió un temor inmenso. No le quedó bastante presencia de ánimo para decirse que Arthur había tenido quizás razones que le aconsejaban no decir la verdad a Adam. Pero las palabras y las miradas de Hetty fueron suficientes para decidir a este último, quien comprendió que no tendría más remedio que darle la carta.

—Tal vez no me crea, Hetty, porque aún lo tiene en buena opinión, creyéndose que la ama más de lo que en realidad la quiere. Pero en mi bolsillo llevo una carta que él le escribió y que me entregó con el encargo de que la hiciese llegar a sus manos. No he leído esta misiva, pero él me aseguró que en ella dice la verdad. Mas antes de dársela, reflexione, Hetty, y no permita que las ilusiones se apoderen demasiado de su mente. Y aun en el caso de que él estuviese dispuesto a cometer la tontería de casarse con usted, ello no le habría dado la felicidad; puede estar segura.

Hetty no replicó una sola palabra, aunque la mención de la carta que Adam no había leído le infundió algunas esperanzas. No tema ninguna duda de que en la misiva Arthur le diría cosas muy distintas de las que Adam pensaba.

—No me coja manía, Hetty, por el hecho de que yo sea el que le traiga este dolor. Dios sabe que he sufrido bastante en mi deseo de evitárselo. Piense también que nadie más que yo está enterado de eso, y que yo cuidaré de usted como si fuese su hermano. Para mí es la misma de siempre, porque no creo que haya hecho mal alguno a sabiendas.

Hetty fue a coger la carta, pero Adam no quiso soltarla sin terminar de hablar. Ella no se fijó en lo que el joven le decía, ni siquiera le oyó, pero en cuanto él soltó la carta, Hetty se apresuró a metérsela en el bolsillo sin abrirla y luego echó a andar con gran rapidez, como deseosa de volver a casa.

—No la lea todavía —dijo Adam—, espere a estar sola. Espérese un poco, y llamemos a los niños. Además, está muy pálida y tiene mala cara; su tía podría notarlo.

Hetty le hizo caso y una vez más apeló a su innato disimulo, que casi había olvidado por culpa de las palabras de Adam. Tenía la carta en el bolsillo y abrigaba la seguridad de que ella le había de dar consuelo, a pesar de lo que dijera su compañero. Echó a correr en busca de Totty y regresó muy pronto con la niña y con mejor color en el rostro; por su parte la pequeña se veía muy contrariada por haberse visto obligada a tirar una manzana verde en la que había clavado los dientes.

—Ven, Totty —dijo Adam—. Te subiré en hombros y estarás tan alta, tan alta, que podrás tocar las ramas de los árboles.

¿Qué niña pequeña se ha negado alguna vez a dejarse consolar por una persona mayor que la coja con fuerza y la eleve a grandes alturas? Ni siquiera creo que Ganimedes llorase cuando lo arrebató el águila para depositarlo sobre el hombro de Júpiter. Totty sonrió complacida desde su posición elevada y segura, y este espectáculo fue muy agradable a los ojos de la madre, que estaba en la puerta de la casa y vio a Adam cuando se acercaba cargado con su pequeña carga.

—¡Dios te bendiga, corazón mío! —dijo la madre con una amorosa expresión que iluminó sus ojos, mientras Totty se inclinaba hacia adelante con los brazos extendidos. La señora Poyser no tenía en aquel momento ojos para Hetty, y dijo sin mirarla:

—Ve en busca de un poco de cerveza, Hetty; las dos muchachas están ocupadas con los quesos.

En cuanto hubo ido en busca de la cerveza y encendido la pipa de su tío, tuvo que acostar a Totty, pero muy pronto bajó con la niña, que ya llevaba su camisón, porque lloraba sin querer dormir. Luego fue necesario preparar la cena, y Hetty debía prestar su ayuda. Adam permaneció en la casa más tiempo del que tenía por costumbre, y mientras tanto entretuvo al matrimonio para que no pensasen en Hetty y la dejasen en paz. En su deseo de que la joven pasara la velada sin ser molestada por nadie, se quedó largo rato y se alegró al observar el dominio que la joven tenía sobre sí misma. Le constaba que aún no le había sido posible leer la carta, pero olvidaba que la joven esperaba que la misiva contradiría todo cuanto él le había confesado. Al joven le fue muy desagradable dejarla, y, sobre todo, le apenó pensar que habrían de trascurrir varios días sin que pudiese saber cómo soportaba su dolor. Finalmente tuvo que marcharse después de estrecharle cariñosamente la mano y darle las buenas noches, y esperó que ella considerara aquello como una leve señal de que su amor siempre sería un refugio, porque él continuaba siendo el mismo a pesar de todo. Se marchó a casa muy preocupado buscando justificaciones que explicaran la

imprudente conducta de la joven, dando la culpa de su debilidad a su dulce y afectuosa naturaleza; en cambio, censuraba cada vez con más dureza a Arthur, diciéndose que su conducta no tenía ninguna excusa posible. Su desesperación ante el sufrimiento de Hetty, y su angustia al pensar que ella quizás estaría siempre lejos de su alcance, acabó de aumentar su encono contra el mal amigo causante de aquella desgracia. Adam era un muchacho recto, sincero, inteligente y honrado, pero si Arístides el Justo estuvo alguna vez celoso y enamorado, no hay duda de que en tal momento no fue magnánimo del todo. Y no puedo pretender que Adam, en aquella época penosa de su vida, sintiese algo más que indignación y compasión. Estaba celoso en extremo y, en la misma proporción que su amor le hacía indulgente para juzgar a Hetty, la amargura le inclinaba a condenar, cada vez con mayor severidad, a Arthur.

«Es muy explicable que la pobrecita perdiese la cabeza —pensó— al ver que un caballero, con sus buenos modales y elegantes trajes, se presentaba ante ella y la trataba con aquel atrevimiento que es característico de los nobles; además, ahora es muy posible que ya no le guste un hombre del pueblo».

Y al pensar en las manos blancas de Arthur, sacó las suyas del bolsillo y se quedó contemplando la dureza de las palmas y las uñas rotas.

«No se puede negar que soy un hombre rudo y, ahora que me fijo en ello, me explico que no pueda gustar a una mujer; sin embargo, nada me costaría encontrar esposa si mi corazón no estuviese ya entregado a ella. Pero poco me importa lo que las demás mujeres piensen de mí si ella no puede quererme. Tal vez habría llegado a amarme, a mí o a otro hombre cualquiera, y a nadie habría temido yo si él no se hubiera interpuesto entre los dos. Ahora, en cambio, le resultaré odioso, porque soy muy distinto de él. Y no sé lo que pasará cuando comprenda que Arthur se ha divertido a su costa. Quizás se muestre dispuesta a casarse con cualquiera. Pero lo mejor es no pensar en esto. Debo dar gracias al cielo de que no haya ocurrido algo peor; y he de recordar que no soy el único hombre que no goza de absoluta felicidad en esta vida. Muchas cosas se hacen con el corazón triste. Así lo quiere Dios, y debemos conformarnos. No es posible que sepamos mejor que Él lo que nos conviene y no lo averiguaremos nunca, aunque pasáramos la vida tratando de comprenderlo. Sin embargo, estoy seguro de que me habría muerto de pena al verla hundida en la vergüenza y el dolor a causa del hombre en quien siempre pensé con orgullo. Y puesto que no ha ocurrido, no tengo derecho a quejarme. Cuando no se ha perdido un brazo o una pierna, no hay que lamentar una o dos heridas superficiales».

Cuando Adam llegaba a este punto en sus reflexiones, cruzó un portillo y divisó a un hombre que andaba a corta distancia. Reconoció a Seth, que volvía de un sermón nocturno, y apresuró el paso para alcanzarle.

—Creí que habrías llegado a casa antes que yo —dijo Adam cuando Seth se volvió para esperarle—; hoy me he retrasado un poco.

—Yo también, pues me entretuve hablando después del sermón con John Barnes, que pretende seguir un camino de perfección y quería preguntarle acerca de ello. Es uno de esos individuos que te llevan más lejos de lo que te figuras. No se encuentran muchos como él.

Siguieron andando juntos y durante dos o tres minutos no cruzaron una sola palabra. Adam no se sentía dispuesto a tratar de sutilezas religiosas, en cambio tenía deseos de cambiar unas palabras de afecto fraternal. En él era un impulso raro, a pesar de lo mucho que se querían él y Seth. Muy pocas veces hablaban de asuntos personales o hacían alusión a sus problemas familiares. Adam era reservado por naturaleza, y Seth mostraba cierta timidez con respecto a su hermano, más práctico que él.

—Oye, Seth —dijo Adam apoyando el brazo en los hombros de su hermano—, ¿has tenido noticias de Dinah desde que se marchó?

—Sí —contestó Seth—. Me autorizó a escribirle para comunicarle cómo seguíamos y de qué modo nuestra madre había soportado su dolor. Hace quince días le escribí y le dije que tenías un nuevo empleo y que nuestra madre estaba más contenta; y el miércoles pasado, cuando fui al correo de Treddleston, encontré una carta de ella. Me parece que te gustaría leerla, pero no te dije nada porque noté que estabas muy preocupado. Esta carta se lee con facilidad, pues Dinah, para ser mujer, escribe muy bien.

Seth sacó la carta del bolsillo y la tendió a Adam quien la cogió y dijo:

—En realidad he tenido estos días grandes preocupaciones; debes excusarme si he estado más silencioso o malhumorado que de costumbre. No por eso te quiero menos, y estoy persuadido de que siempre estaremos unidos.

—Nada tengo que dispensarte, Adam, pues de sobra sé que tus sentimientos son siempre los mismos.

—Nuestra madre ya está en la puerta para ver si llegamos —dijo Adam mientras emprendían la subida de la cuesta—. Como de costumbre, está a oscuras. ¡Hola, Gyp! Parece que estás contento de verme.

Lisbeth entró de nuevo en la casa y encendió una vela, porque acababa de oír los pasos de sus hijos

sobre la hierba aun antes de que Gyp empezase a ladrar.

—¡Hola, hijos míos! Nunca se me hicieron tan largas las horas como este domingo. ¿Qué habéis hecho hasta ahora?

—Sería mejor que no estuvieras a oscuras —dijo Adam—. Eso hace que el tiempo parezca más largo, madre.

—¿Y para qué tendría que encender una vela en domingo cuando estoy sola en casa y es pecado trabajar, de modo que ni siquiera puedo entretenerme haciendo calceta? Ya es bastante largo el día para que esté mirando el libro, que no sé leer. ¡Pues sí que sería un buen modo de acortar el tiempo el malgastar una buena vela! ¿Cuál de los dos quiere cenar? Porque estoy segura de que a estas horas o no tenéis apetito o habéis cenado ya.

—Yo tengo hambre, madre —dijo Seth sentándose a la mesita que acababa de poner después de encender la luz.

—Yo he cenado ya. Ven Gyp —dijo Adam tomando de la mesa una patata fría y acariciando la ruda cabeza gris levantada hacia él.

—No tienes por qué dar nada al perro —dijo Lisbeth—, ya le he dado de comer. Ten la seguridad de que no me olvido de él cuando no tengo otra cosa tuya en que ocuparme.

—Pues, entonces, ven, Gyp —dijo Adam—. Nos iremos a la cama. Buenas noches, madre. Estoy muy cansado.

—¿Qué le pasa? —preguntó Lisbeth a Seth en cuanto Adam hubo desaparecido escalera arriba—. Hace unos días que está muy triste. Esta mañana, después de que te marcharas, le sorprendí en el taller sentado y sin hacer nada, y ni siquiera tenía un libro delante.

—Estos últimos días ha trabajado mucho, madre, y estoy seguro de que tiene preocupaciones. Procura fingir que no lo has notado; no quiero que se enfade. Sé con él tan bondadosa como puedas y no le digas nada que le moleste.

—¿Quién habla de molestarle? ¿Y cómo puedo ser más bondadosa con él? Voy a hacerle una torta para que desayune mañana.

Al llegar a su cuarto, Adam se quitó la chaqueta y el chaleco y, a la luz de la vela de sebo, empezó a leer la carta de Dinah:

Mi querido hermano Seth: Hace ya tres días que su carta estaba en Correos sin que yo lo supiera, porque no tenía bastante dinero para pagar el porte. Aquí estamos pasando una temporada de miseria y de enfermedad a causa de las lluvias que han caído, como si, de nuevo, se hubiesen abierto las ventanas del cielo; y tener dinero en una temporada como ésta, cuando hay tantas necesidades, sería como desconfiar de la misericordia divina. Hablo de eso porque no quisiera que se figurase que he demorado la respuesta o que me alegré poco de los bienes terrenos que han correspondido a su hermano Adam. Está muy justificado el honor y el amor que le demuestra, pues Dios le ha otorgado grandes dones y los utiliza como el patriarca José, quien, al verse exaltado a un puesto de poder y de confianza, pensaba con ternura en su padre y en su hermano menor. Mi corazón se inclina hacia su anciana madre desde el día en que pude permanecer a su lado en horas de tristeza. Háblele de mí y dígale que todas las tardes pienso en ella, cuando llega el crepúsculo, recordando cuando estuve a su lado y con las manos cogidas, mientras yo pronunciaba palabras de consuelo que me fueron dictadas por el cielo. ¡Ah! Es una hora bendita, Seth, cuando decrece la luz exterior y el cuerpo está algo fatigado por el trabajo. Entonces brilla con mayor fuerza la luz interior y tenemos una sensación más fuerte de confianza en el poder de Dios. Suelo sentarme a oscuras en mi habitación y cierro los ojos, lo cual me da la ilusión de que ya no tengo cuerpo y de que no sufriré más necesidades. Entonces las penalidades, las tristezas, el pecado que he podido ver por doquier y que me han hecho llorar, todas las angustias de los hijos de los hombres, que a veces me envuelven como una súbita oscuridad, parecen pesar sobre mí como si compartiese la cruz del Redentor. Comprendo que el amor infinito también sufre y llora, y que sólo el ciego egoísmo puede buscar el modo de evitar el dolor que sufre toda la creación. Con seguridad no es ninguna bendición el verse libre del dolor mientras éste y el pecado existan en el mundo. El dolor es una parte del amor y éste no trata de librarse de aquél. No sólo me dice esto el espíritu, sino que lo advierto en las mismas palabras del Evangelio. ¿Acaso no hay súplicas en el cielo? ¿Acaso no está allí el hombre del dolor, en el cuerpo crucificado, dentro de cuya envoltura camal ascendió al cielo? ¿Y no es Él uno solo con el Amor infinito, del mismo modo que nuestro amor se confunde con nuestro dolor?

Últimamente me han preocupado mucho tales ideas y he comprendido, con nueva claridad, el significado de estas palabras: «Si el hombre me ama, que tome mi cruz». Y me ha parecido que eso

explicaba las penas y las persecuciones que atraemos sobre nosotros mismos al confesar el nombre de Jesús. Mas, sin duda, estas ideas son muy limitadas. La verdadera cruz del Redentor era el pecado y el dolor del mundo, que tanto agobiaba su corazón, y ésta es la cruz que hemos de compartir con Él si queremos gozar de una parte de ese amor divino que se confunde con su dolor.

En la parte que me ha correspondido y acerca de la cual me pregunta, tengo más de lo que necesito. He trabajado sin parar en la fábrica, aunque algunos obreros han sido despedidos temporalmente. Estoy mucho más fuerte, de modo que siento muy poco cansancio después de andar o de hablar largo rato. Lo que dice acerca de que sigue viviendo en su casa con su madre y su hermano me demuestra que está muy bien guiado; es indudable que debe continuar ahí, pues buscar en otra parte mayores bendiciones sería igual que depositar una falsa ofrenda sobre el altar esperando que viniese a consumirla un fuego divino. Mi trabajo y mi alegría están aquí, entre las montañas, y algunas veces llego a temer que me intereso demasiado por mi vida entre esta gente, y que me desagradaría ser llamada a otra parte.

Le agradezco las noticias que me da de mis queridos amigos de Hall Farm; porque si bien les escribí una carta, aún no he recibido respuesta. Mi tía no se decide nunca a escribir; comprendo, porque lo he visto, que el trabajo de la casa es suficiente para ella. Mi corazón no la olvida, y tampoco a sus hijos, que son mis parientes más próximos. Tampoco dejo de recordar nada de aquella casa. En mis sueños me parece volver a ella y con gran frecuencia, en lo mejor de mi trabajo o de mis predicaciones, se presenta súbitamente el recuerdo de todos, como si necesitasen algo o sufriesen algún dolor, lo cual todavía me resulta oscuro. Es posible que esto tenga algún significado y espero la ocasión de que lo vea con claridad. Usted me dice que todos están bien.

Espero que volveremos a vemos en este mundo, aunque quizás no por ahora, porque mis hermanos en Leeds quieren tenerme algún tiempo entre ellos en cuanto se me presente la oportunidad de salir de Snowfield.

Adiós, querido hermano, aunque en realidad esto no es una despedida, porque los hijos de Dios que han podido verse cara a cara, que han podido comulgar juntos y sentir que en ambos obra el mismo espíritu, nunca se hallarán separados, aunque las montañas se interpongan entre ellos. Sus almas parecen dilatarse gracias a esta unión y sus pensamientos influyen continuamente uno sobre otro, comunicándose nuevas fuerzas. Su fiel hermana y compañera de trabajos en Jesucristo.

DINAH MORRIS

P. D. No tengo bastante habilidad para escribir en caracteres tan pequeños como usted, y mi pluma se mueve despacio. Por eso apenas puedo expresar lo que hay en mi mente. Salude a su madre con un beso de mi parte. Cuando nos despedimos me pidió que la besara dos veces.

Adam dobló la carta, y estaba sentado en el cabezal de la cama con la cabeza apoyada en el brazo cuando Seth entró en la habitación.

—¿Has leído la carta? —le preguntó.

—Sí —dijo Adam—. No sé lo que habría pensado de ella y de su carta si nunca la hubiese visto. Creo que me habría parecido una vulgar farsante. Pero esa joven da la impresión de que cuanto hace y dice está bien, de modo que mientras leía la carta me pareció estar viéndola. Es maravilloso cómo recuerdo su cara y su voz. Estoy seguro, Seth, de que te haría muy feliz y que es la mujer que te conviene.

—No hay que pensar en eso —dijo Seth con acento dolido—. Me habló con gran firmeza y no es mujer capaz de decir una cosa y pensar en otra.

—No, pero podrían variar sus sentimientos. A veces las mujeres llegan a amar a un hombre de un modo gradual, y no es el mejor fuego el que estalla de pronto. Yo, en tu lugar, iría a verla de vez en cuando.

Además, te convendría marcharte tres o cuatro días, y estoy seguro de que no te resultarían muy largos los cincuenta kilómetros que habrías de recorrer.

—Mucho me gustaría volverla a ver si a ella no le importara —contestó Seth.

—No le disgustará —añadió Adam poniéndose en pie y apartando la chaqueta—. Para todos nosotros sería muy agradable que te aceptase. Recuerda que nuestra madre la acogió con mucho cariño y parecía estar muy contenta en su compañía.

—Sí —dijo Seth con timidez—. Y Dinah siente mucho afecto por Hetty. Piensa mucho en ella.

Adam no contestó nada y los dos hermanos se separaron después de darse las buenas noches.

XXXI

En el dormitorio de Hetty

Ya no había bastante luz para acostarse sin una vela, ni siquiera en casa de la señora Poyser, donde todo el mundo se iba a dormir temprano; así pues, Hetty empuñaba una al subir a su dormitorio poco después de la marcha de Adam, y una vez allí cerró la puerta por dentro. Por fin podría leer la carta. Era preciso encontrar algún consuelo. ¿Cómo podía Adam saber la verdad? Era muy explicable que el joven hablase como lo hacía.

Dejó la vela sobre un mueble y sacó la carta. Olía débilmente a rosas, lo cual le dio, por un instante fugaz, la ilusión de que Arthur estaba a su lado. Luego llevó la misiva a los labios y sintió que desaparecían todos sus temores. Mas su corazón empezó a palpitar de un modo raro y le temblaron las manos al romper el sello. Leía con lentitud, pues no tenía facilidad para comprender la escritura de un caballero, aunque Arthur se había esforzado en escribir del modo más claro posible.

Queridísima Hetty: Siempre te dije la verdad al asegurarte que te amaba y que nunca olvidaré nuestro amor. Seré tu verdadero amigo mientras viva, y espero poder probártelo de mil maneras. Si en esta carta digo algo que te apene, no creas que es por falta de amor y de ternura, pues por ti sería capaz de hacer cualquier cosa, siempre y cuando hubiese de proporcionarte la felicidad. No sin gran pena puedo imaginarme a mi pequeña Hetty derramando lágrimas cuando no estoy a su lado para secárselas con mis besos. Y, si me dejase llevar por mis impulsos, estaría ahora contigo en vez de escribirte. Mucho me cuesta despedirme de ti para siempre y más aún escribir palabras que puedan parecerte crueles, aunque son hijas de mis mejores sentimientos.

Queridísima Hetty, adorada mía; por dulce que haya sido nuestro amor y a pesar de lo feliz que yo sería si me amaras durante toda la vida, comprendo que habría sido mejor para los dos no haber conocido nunca esta dicha, y que mi deber me obliga a rogarte que me quieras y me recuerdes lo menos posible. La culpa es mía, porque soy incapaz de resistir el deseo de estar cerca de ti, a pesar de saber que mi amor podría causarte grandes dolores. Yo debía haber resistido a mis sentimientos, y eso es lo que hubiese hecho de ser mejor de lo que soy; pero ahora, cuando ya no puede cambiarse lo pasado, tengo la obligación de velar por ti y evitarte determinados daños. Desde luego, comprendo que sería un gran mal para ti seguir profesándome tu amor, lo cual te impediría pensar en otro hombre que, con su afecto, puede hacerte más feliz que yo, y tampoco debes continuar esperando en el futuro algo que no puede llegar a ocurrir. Ten en cuenta, querida Hetty, que si yo accediese a lo que tú me pediste un día, y te hiciese mi esposa, realizaría un acto que serviría más para tu desgracia que para tu bienestar. Sé que no podrás ser feliz más que casándote con un hombre de tu propia condición. Y si yo me casara contigo, sólo aumentaría el mal que ya he hecho, además de faltar a mi deber con la sociedad. Tú, querida Hetty, desconoces en absoluto el mundo en que he de vivir siempre, y estoy seguro que empezarías a aborrecerme, porque en muy pocas cosas seríamos semejantes.

Y puesto que no puedo casarme contigo, es preciso que nos separemos; hemos de procurar no seguir considerándonos enamorados uno de otro. No sabes cuán desgraciado soy al escribirte así, pero no puedo hacer otra cosa. Enfádate conmigo, adorada mía, porque lo merezco, pero no creas que dejaré de quererte y de sentir agradecimiento hacia ti, y que no me acordaré más de mi Hetty. Y si te agobia algún dolor, cosa que no podemos prever, ten la certeza de que para remediarlo haré cuanto esté a mi alcance.

Ya una vez te dije adonde debías dirigir tu carta si querías escribirme, pero anoto esta misma dirección

al pie, por si acaso la has olvidado. De todos modos, no me escribas a no ser que pueda hacer algo por ti, porque, querida Hetty, tú y yo hemos de esforzamos en pensar el uno en el otro lo menos que podamos. Perdóname y procura olvidar todo cuanto se relaciona conmigo, a excepción de que mientras viva seguiré siendo tu fiel amigo.

ARTHUR DONNITHORNE

Hetty leyó lentamente esta carta y, cuando levantó el rostro, en el antiguo y turbio espejo se reflejó su palidez, un rostro blanco como el mármol, de formas infantiles; pero en él se veía algo más intenso que la tristeza propia de una niña. Hetty no vio su propio rostro, no vio nada, y sólo sintió que tenía frío, que se encontraba mal y que temblaba. La carta se agitó en su mano y luego la dejó encima del mueble. Aquel temblor y aquel frío eran algo horrible que le hacía olvidar las ideas que lo producían, y se levantó para tomar una gruesa capa con la que se envolvió y se sentó, como si solamente quisiera recobrar el calor. Luego tomó la carta con mano más firme, y empezó a leerla de nuevo. Aquella vez se le llenaron los ojos de lágrimas, y fueron tan abundantes que la cegaron y hasta humedecieron el papel. Sólo comprendía que Arthur se mostraba muy cruel, tanto por escribirle de aquel modo como por no querer casarse con ella. Para ella no existían razones que lo impidiesen. ¿Cómo podía creer que resultaría una desgracia de la realización de todos sus sueños? No podía imaginarse la posibilidad de aquella desdicha de ninguna manera.

Al dejar de nuevo la carta, descubrió en el espejo su propia imagen; tenía los ojos enrojecidos y el semblante húmedo de lágrimas. Se veía como una compañera que pudiese compadecerse de ella. Se apoyó en los codos y contempló aquellos ojos oscuros y llenos de lágrimas; se fijó en la boca temblorosa; observó que las lágrimas eran cada vez más abundantes y que la boca se agitaba a causa de los sollozos.

El desmoronamiento del mundo de sus sueños, el horrible golpe que acababa de recibir su pasión, deprimieron de tal modo su espíritu, deseoso de placeres, y lo agobiaron con un dolor tan grande, que incluso aniquiló su resistencia y suprimió su cólera. Se quedó sollozando hasta que se apagó la bujía y luego, fatigada, dolorida y atontada por el llanto, se tendió en la cama sin desnudarse y se quedó dormida.

Penetraba en la estancia la débil luz del amanecer cuando despertó, un poco después de las cuatro, sintiéndose desgraciada, aunque de momento no recordaba la causa. Sin embargo, poco a poco la luz de la verdad penetró en su mente. Luego se asustó al pensar que debería ocultar su dolor, y también soportarlo, mientras durase la luz de aquel nuevo día. No pudo permanecer tendida por más tiempo; se levantó y se acercó a la mesa, donde aún estaba la carta; abrió el cajoncito de sus tesoros, que contenía los pendientes y el guardapelo, pruebas de su corta felicidad y de la eterna tristeza que había de seguirla. Mirando las pequeñas joyas que antes solía contemplar y acariciar como precursoras del futuro paraíso de riquezas que la esperaba, revivió los momentos en que había recibido aquellos pequeños regalos acompañados de tiernas caricias, de hermosas palabras y de brillantes miradas que la llenaban de maravillada y deliciosa sorpresa, pues todo aquello era mucho más dulce que cuanto hubiera podido imaginarse. Y el mismo Arthur que la miró y le habló de aquel modo, que, al parecer, estaba aún a su lado, y cuyo brazo creía sentir en tomo a su cuerpo, así como también el contacto de su mejilla y el aliento de sus labios, aquel mismo Arthur era el hombre cruel que le había escrito aquella carta, aquella carta que abrió y desdobló de nuevo para poder leerla por tercera vez. Su atontamiento, hijo del llanto de la noche pasada, la obligó a repetir la lectura de la carta para convencerse de que era cierta su desgracia y, en efecto, tan cruel como se imaginaba. Para ello tuvo que acercarse a la ventana porque, de otra suerte, la escasa luz reinante no se lo habría permitido. Sí, era peor todavía, era aun más cruel. Encolerizada, arrugó el papel y sintió odio hacia aquel hombre a quien tanto había amado.

Pero aquella mañana no derramó lágrimas, pues las había agotado durante la noche anterior, y así sus ojos permanecieron secos y se vio sumida en una tristeza mayor que en los primeros momentos.

Durante todas las mañanas de su vida o, por lo menos, así se lo imaginaba, tendría que levantarse persuadida de que el día no iba a proporcionarle ninguna dicha. No hay desesperación tan absoluta como la que sentimos en los primeros momentos de nuestro primer dolor, cuando aún ignoramos qué es el haber sufrido y el haberse consolado, el haber sentido desesperación y, más tarde, el haber recobrado la esperanza. Mientras Hetty empezaba a quitarse indolentemente la ropa que llevó durante toda la noche para lavarse y peinarse, se dijo que su vida seguiría siendo siempre igual, que en adelante sólo haría cosas que no le proporcionarían ningún placer, que tendría que seguir entregándose a las antiguas tareas y ver a personas que no le importaban nada, yendo a la iglesia y a Treddleston, a tomar el té con la señora Best, y todo ello sin que una idea feliz pasara por su mente. Sus cortas y venenosas dichas marchitaron para siempre todas las pequeñas alegrías que, en otro tiempo, constituyeron la dulzura de su vida: el traje negro y dispuesto para la feria de Treddleston, la invitación en casa del señor Britton, la verbena de Broxton, la

idea de las negativas que daría a los jóvenes del lugar y la esperanza de su propia boda, que llegaría, por fin, cuando ya tuviese un traje de seda y mucha ropa… Todo eso le parecía triste y aburrido, todo en adelante sería tan triste para ella, y siempre viviría sin esperanzas y agobiada por deseos imposibles.

Se interrumpió en su tarea de desnudarse y se apoyó en el viejo armario ropero. Llevaba los brazos y el cuello desnudos y su cabello colgaba formando delicados rizos, tan hermoso como aquella noche, dos meses atrás, cuando paseaba por su dormitorio llena de vanidad y de esperanza. Ahora ya no pensaba en su cuello ni en sus brazos. Incluso su propia belleza la dejaba indiferente. Sus ojos contemplaban con tristeza la ordinaria y vieja habitación, y luego, sin ver nada, se fijaban en el día naciente. ¿Atravesó su mente el recuerdo de Dinah? ¿Pensó en sus palabras proféticas, que la hicieron enfadar, o en el ruego afectuoso que le dirigió al recomendarle que pensara en ella en un caso de necesidad? No, porque aquella impresión había sido demasiado leve para que guardase memoria de ella. Cualquier consuelo o prueba de afecto que Dinah hubiese podido darle entonces habría sido indiferente para Hetty, pues aquella mañana no pensaba en otra cosa que en su pasión tronchada. Solamente se decía que no podría continuar allí, llevando la antigua vida; y que sería mejor que fuera en busca de algo nuevo para no sumirse en la rutina diaria. Por su gusto se habría marchado aquella misma mañana sin ver de nuevo los rostros de las personas que habitaban en la casa. Pero Hetty no tenía una naturaleza que se complaciera afrontando dificultades, y no se atrevía a desprenderse de lo que le era familiar para ir, a ciegas, en busca de algo desconocido. Su naturaleza era vanidosa, no apasionada; y en caso de verse obligada a recurrir a una medida violenta, sólo lo haría impulsada por la desesperación y el terror. En el estrecho círculo de su imaginación apenas había espacio para sus pensamientos, y pronto tomó una decisión que la alejaría de su vida presente. Rogaría a su tío que le permitiese ser doncella de servicio. La de la señorita Lydia la ayudaría a conseguir empleo en cuanto supiese que tenía el permiso de su tío.

Después de tomar esta decisión, recogió su cabello y empezó a lavarse. Ahora ya le resultaba más fácil bajar las escaleras y portarse como de costumbre. Aquel mismo día pediría permiso a su tío. Gracias a la excelente salud de que gozaba la joven, para que en su rostro se mostrasen las huellas del sufrimiento habría sido preciso que éste fuese largo y continuado, y en cuanto hubo sujetado su peinado con el pequeño gorro, un observador no muy atento habría sentido solicitada su atención más por la redondez de sus mejillas y de su cuello, y por la negrura de sus ojos y pestañas, que por un pequeño indicio de tristeza. Pero en cuanto tomó la arrugada carta para guardarla en el cajón a fin de ocultarla a las miradas, derramó ardientes lágrimas que no le proporcionaron el alivio del llanto de la noche pasada. Se secó rápidamente, resuelta a no llorar durante el día para que nadie observase su dolor ni su desengaño; y la idea de que en ella estarían fijos los ojos de sus tíos le dio el dominio de sí misma que con frecuencia acompaña a un gran temor. En efecto, Hetty pensaba en su dolor secreto del mismo modo que el enfermo y mísero preso puede pensar en la picota. Sus tíos juzgarían vergonzosa su conducta, y la vergüenza equivalía a la tortura. Esta era la pobre conciencia de Hetty.

Así pues, cerró su cajón y salió para dedicarse a su trabajo.

Por la tarde, cuando el señor Poyser estaba fumando su pipa, Hetty aprovechó la oportunidad de que se hubiese ausentado su tía para decirle:

—Tío, quisiera que me permitieses ser doncella de servicio.

El señor Poyser se quitó la pipa de la boca y, muy sorprendido, miró a la joven. Esta, que se dedicaba a coser en aquel momento, prosiguió activamente su tarea.

—¿Quién te ha metido esa idea en la cabeza, hija mía? —dijo por fin después de soltar una bocanada de humo.

—Me gustaría… mucho más que el trabajo de la granja.

—Nada de eso. Lo crees así porque desconoces ese trabajo, hija mía. Piensa que no sería tan bueno para tu salud, ni tampoco para tu suerte en la vida. Por mi parte, deseo que estés a nuestro lado hasta que te cases con un buen hombre; eres mi sobrina carnal y por nada del mundo quisiera que fueses a servir, ni siquiera a casa de un caballero, mientras yo tenga una casa para que vivas en ella.

El señor Poyser hizo una pausa y luego dio un par de caladas a su pipa.

—Me gusta la labor de aguja —dijo Hetty—, y estoy segura de que ganaría un buen sueldo.

—¿Te ha tratado con severidad tu tía? —preguntó el señor Poyser, sin hacer caso del último argumento de la joven—. Si es así, no hagas caso, hija, porque lo hace por tu bien. Te quiere, y estoy seguro de que muy pocas mujeres te habrían tratado tan bien como ella.

—No, no es a causa de mí tía —replicó Hetty—, sino porque ese trabajo me gustaría más.

—Desde luego comprendo que te convenía aprender a coser y por eso te di permiso, en vista de que la señora Pomfret estaba dispuesta a enseñarte. Nunca se sabe lo que puede ocurrir y conviene estar preparado

para todo. Pero jamás pensé en que tuvieras que ir a servir. En mi familia todos hemos comido nuestro propio pan y queso, desde los tiempos más remotos, ¿verdad, padre? Estoy seguro de que no le gustaría que su nieta fuese a ganar un sueldo.

—De ningún modo —contestó el viejo Martin con tono decidido e inclinándose para fijar los ojos en el suelo—. Pero esta chica se parece a su madre. No sabes cuánto me costó dominarla hasta que, al fin, se casó, contra mi gusto, con un sujeto que sólo tenía dos cabezas de ganado cuando podría haber tenido lo menos diez en su granja. Y así la pobre murió antes de los treinta años.

Pocas veces el viejo pronunciaba tantas palabras seguidas, pero la pregunta de su hijo cayó como un trozo de combustible seco sobre los tizones de un resentimiento que aún no se había extinguido y que había causado que el abuelo siempre se mostrase más indiferente con respecto a Hetty que con los hijos de su hijo. La fortuna de la madre de Hetty se había desvanecido en las manos de aquel inútil de Sorrel, y era indudable que la niña había heredado el carácter de su padre.

—¡Pobrecilla! —dijo Martin hijo, que lamentaba haber provocado aquella dureza retrospectiva—. Tuvo muy mala suerte. En cambio, Hetty tiene la oportunidad de casarse con el mejor muchacho de toda la comarca.

Después de hacer esta insinuación, el señor Poyser se entregó de nuevo a su pipa y al silencio, aunque sin dejar de mirar a Hetty para ver si daba alguna señal de haber renunciado a su mal aconsejado deseo. Pero en vez de eso, Hetty, aun a pesar de sí misma, se echó a llorar, no sólo a causa de la negativa, sino también por la tristeza que había contenido durante todo el día.

—¡Vamos, vamos! —dijo el señor Poyser con tono risueño y al parecer sin dar importancia al asunto—. Vamos, no llores. El llanto queda para los que no tienen hogar y no para los que quieren abandonar el suyo. ¿Qué te parece? —continuó dirigiéndose a su esposa, que en ese momento acababa de regresar y que movía con feroz rapidez las agujas de su labor de calceta, como si este movimiento le fuese tan necesario como el de las antenas a un insecto.

—¿Qué me parece? Pues que no tardarán en robamos las gallinas, porque esta muchacha se olvida de encerrarlas por las noches en los gallineros. ¿Y qué te pasa ahora, Hetty? ¿Por qué lloras?

—Pues porque quiere ser doncella de servicio —dijo el señor Poyser—, y yo le he dicho que no piense en esas tonterías.

—Ya me figuraba yo que se le había ocurrido algún disparate, porque en todo el día no ha abierto la boca. Esto se debe a la costumbre de tratar con los criados del cazadero; no sé por qué hemos sido tan tontos de permitírselo. Ella se figura que con esa gente llevaría una vida más distinguida, y quizás se imaginará, también, que pertenecen a su propia clase; ¡y pensar que la he tenido en mi casa desde que no era mayor que Marty! Es posible que haya llegado a creer que una doncella de servicio no tiene nada que hacer salvo llevar trajes bonitos. Esa muchacha, desde que amanece hasta que se acuesta, no piensa más que en ponerse trapos, hasta el punto de que, muchas veces, le he preguntado si preferiría ser un espantapájaros de los que se ponen en los campos, porque entonces estaría formada de trapos por dentro y trapos por fuera. Yo nunca le daré mi consentimiento para que vaya a trabajar de doncella de servicio mientras tenga parientes que estén dispuestos a cuidarla hasta que se case con alguien que valga más que un criado, pues éstos no son caballeros ni personas corrientes. Viven sin hacer nada útil y, generalmente, se contentan con cruzar las manos a la espalda por debajo del faldón de la librea, en espera de que su mujer trabaje para ellos.

—Eso es —replicó el señor Poyser—. Hemos de procurarle un buen marido, y, por suerte, lo tenemos al alcance de la mano. Vamos, hija, no llores más y vete a la cama. Ya cuidaré yo de que seas algo mejor que una doncella de servicio, y por ahora procura que no tengamos que hablar más de eso.

Cuando Hetty hubo desaparecido escalera arriba, añadió:

—No comprendo por qué quiere marcharse; últimamente parecía corresponder a Adam Bede.

—Es imposible saber lo que quiere; esa muchacha es de hielo. Incluso he llegado a creer que Molly sentiría más abandonarnos, a pesar de que sólo lleva un año con nosotros, que la misma Hetty, que ha vivido tanto tiempo en esta casa. Y si le ha dado la manía de querer ser doncella de servicio por su trato frecuente con los criados del cazadero, ya verás cómo pongo remedio enseguida a eso.

—Estoy seguro de que sentiríais separarte de ella —observó el señor Poyser—. No sólo porque su trabajo es bastante útil, sino también porque le has tomado cariño. ¿No es cierto?

—¿Que si lo sentiría? La quiero bastante más de lo que merece. Ya ves cómo nos habría dejado. No en vano ha estado siete años a mi lado y le he enseñado cuanto he podido, para no cobrarle cariño. ¡Cuántas veces he pensado también que una buena parte de los lienzos que tengo guardados servirían para darle sábanas y manteles cuando se casara y viviera en la parroquia con nosotros, sin alejarse nunca de nuestras

miradas! He sido una tonta pensando así con respecto a ella, cuando es una desagradecida que jamás nos ha tenido el menor afecto.

—No debes dar tanta importancia a eso —replicó el señor Poyser, conciliador—. Estoy seguro de que nos quiere, pero como es tan joven apenas sabe lo que desea. Piensa que a estas edades cualquiera sería capaz de abandonar la casa sin saber por qué.

Las respuestas de su tío, sin embargo, tuvieron sobre Hetty otro efecto además de desalentarla y de hacerla llorar. Comprendió muy bien a quién se refería aquél al aludir a su matrimonio, y al futuro que se le destinaba, y en cuanto volvió a encontrarse en su dormitorio, la posibilidad de casarse con Adam se le ofreció de un modo distinto. En una mente en la que no se desarrollan fuertes simpatías por nadie, y donde no existe el sentido de la justicia y de la razón en que pueda apoyarse su naturaleza agitada para adquirir el valor de sufrir, uno de los primeros resultados del dolor es el de agarrarse, de un modo desesperado y vago, a cualquier cosa que pueda cambiar el estado de las cosas. La limitada visión de Hetty sobre su futuro, que en ningún momento fue más allá que un cálculo fantástico de sus probables placeres y dolores, había quedado interrumpida a causa de sus actuales sufrimientos, y por ello se sentía dispuesta a tomar una de esas decisiones irreflexivas y convulsivas por las cuales hombres y mujeres desgraciados se lanzan, de una pena temporal, a la desgracia de toda una vida.

¿Por qué no casarse con Adam? Poco le importaba una cosa u otra, siempre que trajese algún cambio en su vida. Confiaba en que él seguiría deseoso de tenerla por esposa, pero no se preocupó para nada por la felicidad del propio muchacho.

Tal vez el lector creerá muy extraño este movimiento impulsivo hacia una decisión que podría haberle parecido repugnante dada la situación en que se hallaba la joven en la segunda noche de su tristeza.

En efecto, los actos de un alma tan pequeña y trivial como la de Hetty, cuando luchan entre los distintos destinos propios del ser humano, suelen ser siempre raros. De igual modo son extraños los movimientos de la pequeña nave que, sin lastre alguno, surca el tempestuoso mar. Y sin embargo, ¡qué hermosa era con su blanca vela a la luz del sol, cuando estaba anclada en la tranquila bahía!

«Dejad que soporte la pérdida el hombre que desató sus amarras». Pero eso no salvaría la hermosa embarcación que pudo haber sido la alegría de una larga vida.

XXXII

La señora Poyser habla claro

En la reunión del siguiente sábado por la tarde en Donnithorne Arms, hubo una discusión muy animada acerca del incidente ocurrido aquel mismo día; nada menos que la segunda aparición del individuo elegante de botas altas, y que, según decían algunos, era un granjero que deseaba arrendar la granja del cazadero, mientras que otros sostenían que era el futuro administrador; pero el señor Casson, testigo personal de la visita del forastero, dijo desdeñosamente que no era más que un recaudador, como lo había sido el mismo Satchell. Nadie pensó siquiera en contradecir el testimonio del señor Casson, que aseguraba haber visto al forastero.

—Le he visto con mis propios ojos —dijo—. Le vi venir a lo largo del prado del manzano silvestre, iba en una yegua de pelo corto. Yo me disponía a tomar un vaso de vino, pues eran las diez de la mañana, hora en que acostumbro a hacerlo. Y dije a Knowles cuando se acercó con su carro: «¿Quieres hoy un poco de cebada, Knowles?». Y me volví hacia el granero por el lado del camino de Treddleston. Entonces, al pasar junto al fresno, vi al hombre de las botas altas que venía montado en una yegua de pelo corto. ¡Que no me mueva más si miento! Me quedé quieto hasta que se acercó, y le dije: «Buenos días, señor». Deseaba oír su voz para saber si era un campesino, y por eso repetí: «Buenos días, señor. Hace muy buen tiempo para la cebada, ¿no le parece? Si tenemos suerte habrá buena cosecha». Y él me contestó: «Tiene razón». Pero por el acento de sus palabras —añadió el señor Casson guiñando un ojo—, comprendí que no procedía de ciento cincuenta kilómetros de distancia y estoy seguro de que mi acento debió de parecerle raro, como os ocurre a todos los de Loamshire que no habláis como es debido.

—¿Que no hablamos como es debido? —exclamó Barde Massey con acento desdeñoso—. Usted sí que habla como es debido, igual que un cerdo que chilla podría figurarse que toca el cornetín.

—Tal vez me engaño —contestó el señor Casson con amarga y sardónica sonrisa—. Me parece que un hombre que ha vivido, como yo, muchos años entre caballeros, ha de saber lo que es hablar bien, por lo menos tanto como un maestro de escuela.

—No dudo —contestó Barde con tono irónico— de que usted se ha forjado ilusiones acerca de la perfección de su acento. Puede estar seguro de que cuando la cabra de Michael Holdsworth empieza a balar, se figura que lo hace con un acento intachable.

Como todos eran naturales de Loamshire, ni uno sólo dejó de burlarse del señor Casson, quien, muy juiciosamente, volvió a referirse al primer asunto de la conversación, el cual, lejos de quedar agotado en una sola velada, se renovó al día siguiente en el cementerio, antes de la misa.

Dos o tres días después, hallándose la señora Poyser a la puerta de su casa ocupada en hacer calceta, vio al anciano caballero entrar en el patio a lomos de su póney negro, seguido por el lacayo John. Y la buena señora siempre citaría aquella visión como un caso de corazonada, que tenía algo más que su penetración habitual, pues en el instante en que fijó los ojos en el caballero, se dijo: «No me extrañaría que viniese a hablar de ese individuo que va a tomar en arriendo la granja del cazadero, y con el deseo de que Poyser haga algo en su favor. Pero mi marido dará pruebas de ser tonto si lo hace».

Algo raro debía de haber en el aire, porque eran contadísimas las visitas que el caballero hacía a sus arrendatarios; y aunque durante el año anterior la señora Poyser se había recitado muchos discursos imaginarios que pensaba dirigir al caballero la primera vez que apareciese en la granja, el caso es que tales discursos continuaron siendo imaginarios.

—Buenos días, señora Poyser —dijo el anciano caballero mirándola con sus ojos de miope, cosa que,

según pensó la buena mujer, casi la ofendía, pues no parecía sino que ella fuese un insecto y que el caballero se dispusiera a aplastarla con el pulgar.

—Servidora de su señoría —contestó sin embargo haciendo una reverencia y avanzando luego hacia él, pues no era mujer capaz de mostrarse descortés con sus superiores si antes no la provocaban seriamente.

—¿Está en casa su esposo, señora Poyser?

—Sí, señor. En la era. Voy a hacerle llamar y, mientras tanto, tenga la bondad de echar pie a tierra y de entrar.

—Gracias, así lo haré. Quiero consultarle sobre un pequeño asunto, pero a usted también le atañe, si no más. Deseo su opinión.

—Hetty, ve corriendo y di a tu tío que venga —ordenó la señora Poyser al entrar en la casa.

El anciano caballero se inclinó para responder a la reverencia de Hetty mientras que Totty, dándose cuenta de que llevaba un delantal manchado de confitura de grosella, ocultaba el rostro detrás del reloj y de vez en cuando asomaba, furtiva, la cabeza para contemplar al recién llegado.

—¡Qué hermosa cocina! —dijo el señor Donnithorne contemplándola con admiración. Siempre hablaba del mismo modo cortés, pronunciando las palabras con mucha claridad, tanto si éstas eran dulces como duras—. Además la tiene muy limpia, señora Poyser; le aseguro que prefiero esta casa a otra cualquiera de la propiedad.

—Pues bien, señor, ya que le gusta tanto, le agradecería mucho que consintiera en hacer algunas reparaciones, porque el maderamen está carcomido y la bodega tan llena de agua que casi llega a la rodilla. Si quiere puede comprobarlo, aunque espero que no dudará de mis palabras. ¿No quiere sentarse, señor?

—Aún no. Quiero ver su lechería; hace muchos años que no lo he hecho. Por otra parte, todo el mundo se hace lenguas del queso y de la manteca que elabora —dijo el caballero al parecer seguro de que entre él y la señora Poyser no podía originarse ninguna desavenencia—. Me parece ver la puerta abierta desde aquí. No le sorprenda si miro con deseo su crema y su manteca. Tengo casi la certeza de que las de la señora Satchell no se podrían comparar con las suyas.

—No puedo decirlo, señor —respondió la señora Poyser—, pues nunca tengo ocasión de ver la manteca de otras casas, aunque me bastaría con olerla para saber cómo es.

—¡Ah! Eso es lo que me gusta —dijo el señor Donnithorne mirando a su alrededor en aquel húmedo templo de la limpieza, pero sin moverse de la puerta—. Estoy seguro de que desayunaría con mucho más apetito si supiese que la manteca y la crema procedían de esta lechería. Realmente es un espectáculo muy agradable. Muchas gracias, pero mi ligera tendencia al reumatismo me hace temer la humedad y por eso me sentaré en su cómoda cocina. ¡Ah, Poyser! ¿Cómo está? ¿Ocupado como siempre en sus asuntos? He estado visitando la hermosa lechería de su esposa, la mejor ama de casa de toda la parroquia, ¿verdad?

El señor Poyser acababa de entrar en mangas de camisa, con el chaleco desabrochado y el rostro más colorado que de costumbre por haberse dedicado a clavar algunas estacas. Y mientras estaba allí de pie, rubicundo, sano y radiante al lado del pequeño, sarmentoso, frío y viejo caballero, parecía una manzana madura junto a una pera reseca.

—¿Quiere sentarse en este sillón, caballero? —dijo acercándole el sillón de su padre—. Lo encontrará muy cómodo.

—No, muchas gracias. Nunca me siento en los sillones —dijo el anciano caballero dejándose caer en una sillita que había junto a la puerta—. ¿Sabe, señora Poyser…? Pero háganme el favor de sentarse los dos. ¿Sabe que no estoy nada satisfecho del modo como la señora Satchell lleva la lechería? Opino que no tiene, como usted, un buen método.

—La verdad, señor, es que no puedo hablar de eso —contestó la señora Poyser con voz dura, enrollando y desenrollando su calceta y mirando al exterior por la ventana mientras continuaba de pie ante el anciano.

Poyser podía sentarse si quería, se dijo, pero ella estaba dispuesta a no hacerlo ni a tomar parte en ninguna conversación de tono suave. El señor Poyser que, por el contrario, estaba muy satisfecho, se sentó en su sillón.

—Y ahora, Poyser, puesto que Satchell ya ha dejado la granja, me propongo arrendarla a un hombre respetable. Estoy cansado de cuidarla yo; ya sabe que en estos casos nada sale bien. Es muy difícil encontrar un administrador competente y, por lo tanto, creo que usted y yo, Poyser, así como también su excelente esposa, aquí presente, podríamos llegar a un arreglo que nos proporcionaría mutuas ventajas.

—¡Oh! —exclamó el señor Poyser, ignorando en absoluto adonde quería ir a parar su interlocutor.

—Si me es permitido hablar, señor —observó la señora Poyser después de mirar con lástima a su marido por su llaneza—, le diré que usted sabe más que yo; pero no comprendo qué nos importa a nosotros la granja del cazadero, pues ya tenemos bastante con la nuestra. Desde luego, me alegro de que venga a vivir a

la parroquia una persona respetable, pues no faltan los que carecen de esta condición.

—Le aseguro que en el señor Thurle encontrará a una persona excelente, y no dudo de que se alegrará de haber consentido en el plan que voy a mencionar, especialmente si, como espero, lo encuentra ventajoso para usted como para él.

—La verdad, señor, es que si es ventajoso para nosotros, se tratará del primer ofrecimiento de esta clase que he oído en mi vida. En este mundo es muy distinto obtener ventajas o darlas. Y no hay duda de que, en general, es preciso esperar mucho antes de que vengan a ofrecérnoslas.

—El caso es, Poyser —dijo el caballero pasando por alto la teoría de la señora Poyser acerca de la prosperidad en el mundo—, que en la granja del cazadero hay demasiadas tierras de pasto y, en cambio, son escasas las de labor, según opinión de Thurle, quien, en realidad, sólo aceptará la granja con la condición de que se haga algún cambio con respecto a las tierras; al parecer, su esposa no es una lechera tan experimentada como la señora Poyser. Así pues, el plan que se me ha ocurrido es hacer un pequeño cambio. Si poseyera usted los pastos de abajo, podría aumentar su lechería, lo cual resultaría provechoso bajo la dirección de su esposa; y a cambio yo le pediría que abasteciese mi casa de leche, crema y manteca a los precios del mercado. Por otra parte, Poyser, usted entregaría a Thurle las lomas de arriba y de abajo que, en realidad, en la estación lluviosa más le molestan que otra cosa. Se corre mucho menos peligro con las tierras de pasto que con las de trigo.

El señor Poyser estaba con el cuerpo inclinado hacia adelante, con los codos apoyados en las rodillas y la boca casi cerrada, al parecer muy preocupado en hacer coincidir las puntas de sus dedos para que representasen con la mayor exactitud posible los costillajes de un navío. Era demasiado listo para no comprender lo que se le proponía y para ignorar la opinión de su mujer acerca del asunto; pero no le gustaba dar respuestas desagradables, a no ser que se tratase de defender la calidad de su trabajo, y siempre prefería ceder que tener una disputa. Además, aquel asunto atañía más a su mujer que a él mismo. Por eso, después de unos momentos de silencio, la miró y le preguntó suavemente:

—¿Qué dices a eso?

La señora Poyser había fijado la mirada severa en su marido mientras éste guardaba silencio, pero ahora volvió el rostro de pronto, contempló con mirada gélida el tejado del establo de las vacas, y atravesando con una de las agujas la labor de calceta, la sujetó con firmeza entre sus manos.

—¿Que qué digo? Que puedes hacer lo que quieras. Eres dueño de ceder o no tus campos antes de terminado el plazo de arriendo, que caerá el año próximo, el día de San Miguel; pero, por mi parte, no quiero trabajar más en la lechería, ni por dinero ni por consideración alguna. Y, según veo, aquí no hay dinero ni consideración, sino egoísmo por parte de los demás y el deseo de meterse el dinero en el bolsillo. Comprendo que hay quien nació dueño de la tierra y que otros han de trabajarla con el sudor de su frente —y la señora Poyser se detuvo un instante para recobrar aliento—. También sé que el deber de los cristianos es someterse a sus mayores y superiores, pero no quiero ser mártir ni quedarme con la piel y los huesos en beneficio de cualquier propietario de Inglaterra, aunque se trate del mismo rey Jorge.

—No, no, mi querida señora Poyser, nada de eso —dijo el caballero confiando aún en sus dotes de persuasión—. Nadie pretende que trabaje más de lo debido. Si se fija bien verá que, de este modo, su trabajo disminuye en vez de aumentar. En la abadía se necesita tanta leche que apenas podrá hacer más manteca y más quesos que en la actualidad; y yo creo que vender la leche es un medio más provechoso de sacar producto de una lechería, ¿no cree?

—Eso es verdad —replicó el señor Poyser, incapaz de contenerse y no dar su opinión acerca de algo relacionado con los beneficios que reportaba la explotación de la granja y olvidando también que, en su caso, no era una cuestión puramente abstracta.

—Me atrevo a decir —replicó con amargura la señora Poyser, volviéndose ligeramente hacía su marido y mirándole con atención concentrada—, me atrevo a decir que estas cosas se afirman muy pronto al amor del fuego y fumando una pipa. Si se pudiera hacer un pudín con sólo pensar en la masa, pronto estaría preparada la comida. ¿Cómo sé yo si necesitarían la leche de un modo constante? ¿Quién me asegura que, dentro de algunos meses, no preferirán aumentar el sueldo a los criados en vez de mantenerlos, y entonces yo me despertaré por las noches preocupada por mis noventa litros de leche y sabiendo que Dingall no me comprará más manteca, aun cuando yo produzca mayor cantidad? Y tendremos que cebar cerdos y luego pedir de rodillas al carnicero que nos los compre; eso después de perder más de la mitad por culpa del sarampión, aparte del trabajo de traer y llevar, que emplearía media jornada de un hombre y un caballo, lo cual habría que descontarlo de los beneficios. Pero hay gente que se figura que con un cedazo podrá transportar toda el agua que quiera.

—Esta dificultad de traer y llevar la leche no tendrá que sufrirla, señora Poyser —dijo el caballero,

figurándose que la discusión de los detalles indicaba ya, por parte de la señora Poyser, cierta conformidad lejana—. Bethell se encargaría de hacer el transporte con el carro y el caballo regularmente.

—¡Oh, señor! Si me lo permite, le diré que nunca quisiera ver a los criados de los caballeros entrar en mi casa para hacer la corte a mis dos criadas, que, sin duda, se quedarían embobadas escuchando sus chismes en el momento en que tendrían que estar fregando el suelo. Aunque me costara la ruina, nunca consentiré en tal cosa.

—Bueno, Poyser —dijo el caballero cambiando de táctica como si la señora Poyser se hubiera retirado de la habitación—, haga lo que quiera. No me será difícil llegar a otro acuerdo para abastecer mi casa y tampoco olvidaré su buena disposición para complacer a su señor y a un vecino. Sé que le gustaría mucho renovar vuestro arrendamiento por tres años más cuando expire el plazo actual. Por su parte, Thurle, que es hombre de algún capital, se encargaría con gusto de las dos haciendas, ya que pueden explotarse juntas; pero no quiero reñir con un antiguo arrendatario como usted.

Verse alejada de este modo de la discusión habría sido más que suficiente para exasperar a la señora Poyser, aun sin la amenaza final. Su esposo, realmente alarmado ante la posibilidad de tener que abandonar la casa donde había nacido, se disponía a empezar una explicación amable.

—La verdad, señor —dijo—, es que me parece difícil…

Pero en aquel momento, la señora Poyser estalló con la desesperada determinación de hablar claro aquella vez, aunque le ordenasen abandonar la granja y su único amparo fuese el asilo.

—Pues bien, señor, si se me permite hablar, y digo esto porque hay quien se figura que el papel de las mujeres consiste en estarse contemplando con toda tranquilidad cómo sus maridos venden el alma, le diría que si el señor Thurle está tan dispuesto a arrendar las dos granjas, es una lástima que no tome esta y vea si le gusta vivir en una casa en la que hay todas las plagas de Egipto: la bodega llena de agua y de sapos y ranas que saltan por la escalera; los suelos podridos y las ratas y ratones que se comen todo el queso y corren por encima de nuestras cabezas cuando estamos en la cama, hasta el punto de que llegamos a temer que se nos coman vivos… Y gracias a Dios que, por ahora, no han devorado todavía a ninguno de nuestros hijos. La verdad, me gustaría ver si hay otro arrendatario, además de Poyser, dispuesto a soportar que no se haga nunca la menor reparación, a pesar de que todo se cae de viejo, y que después tenga que pagar la renta que pagamos. Mire, mire si encuentra a un extraño que quiera llevar esta vida. Estoy segura de que no lo hallará. ¡Ah! ¿No me quiere escuchar? —continuó la señora Poyser siguiendo al anciano más allá de la puerta.

En efecto, éste, después de los primeros momentos de sorpresa, se puso en pie, la saludó moviendo la mano y, sonriendo, fue en busca de su caballo. Pero no pudo alejarse inmediatamente, porque John hacía pasear al animal por el patio y estaba a alguna distancia cuando le llamó su amo.

—Huya, si quiere, de mis palabras, señor, e intrigue para hacernos algún daño, puesto que tiene al viejo Harry por amigo, a falta de otro; pero le digo de una vez para siempre que no somos mudos para que se abuse de nosotros y que no consentiremos que se nos explote como si no supiéramos lo que debemos hacer. Y si soy la única que le dice la verdad, sepa que lo mismo piensa todo el mundo en esta parroquia y en la inmediata, porque su nombre no es querido en ninguna parte, si exceptuamos a dos o tres viejos a quienes les da, a veces, alguna ropa de franela y un plato de sopa con la esperanza de salvar su alma, como si fuese muy difícil salvar una cosa tan pequeña.

En determinadas ocasiones dos criadas y un carretero pueden constituir un público temible, y mientras el caballero salía montado en su caballo negro, su intensa miopía no le impidió observar que Molly, Nancy y Tim sonreían no lejos de allí. Quizás sospechó que el malhumorado y viejo John se reía también a su espalda, lo cual era cierto. Mientras tanto, el *bull-dog* y el *terrier* negro y pardo, el perro pastor de Alick, y el ánsar que aleteaba a una distancia conveniente de los cascos del caballo, parecían corear de un modo formidable el solo de la señora Poyser.

Apenas vio ésta que el caballo se alejaba, dio media vuelta, dirigió a las dos risueñas muchachas una mirada que las obligó a echar a correr, y, quitando la lanza que atravesaba su calceta, reanudó su labor con su rapidez habitual mientras volvía a entrar en la casa.

—Veo que le has hablado claro —dijo el señor Poyser algo alarmado e intranquilo; no le hacía ninguna gracia el estallido de su mujer.

—Sí. Le he dicho la verdad —empezó la señora Poyser—. Y no sabes lo desahogada que me he quedado. La vida acaba por resultar inaguantable cuando se ha eje callar y si te ves obligada a decir lo que piensas un poco cada día y no de una vez. Y aunque llegue a ser tan vieja como el caballero, no me arrepentiré de haberlo hecho.

—Pero, en cambio, no te gustará cambiar de casa cuando venza el plazo del arrendamiento —dijo el

señor Poyser—, ni ir a vivir a una parroquia desconocida donde no tengas a nadie con quien tratar. Eso será muy duro para nosotros dos y también para mi pobre padre.

—De nada sirve preocuparse. De aquí a entonces pueden ocurrir muchas cosas. Antes de que venza el arrendamiento quizás el capitán será ya dueño de todo —dijo la señora Poyser, inclinada al parecer a ser optimista contra su costumbre y a no perder la esperanza con respecto a un conflicto que ella misma se había buscado sola.

—No me preocupo, te lo aseguro —dijo el señor Poyser abandonando su sillón y dirigiéndose lentamente a la puerta—, pero me sabría muy mal dejar esta hacienda y la parroquia en que nací y me he criado, y donde también nació mi padre. Si eso ocurriese dejaríamos aquí nuestras raíces y no prosperaríamos en ninguna parte.

XXXIII

MÁS ESLABONES

Recogieron por fin la cebada y se celebraron las cenas de las cosechas sin esperar la de las habas. Se cosecharon también las manzanas y las nueces, y se guardaron debidamente. El olor a suero de las granjas había sido sustituido por un fuerte aroma de cerveza. Los bosques que había detrás del cazadero adquirieron un solemne esplendor bajo los cielos encapotados. Llegó la fiesta de San Miguel, con sus olorosos cestos de ciruelas y sus flores aromáticas; pero el señor Thurle, aquel imponente y magnífico granjero, no acudió a la granja del cazadero, y el anciano caballero no tuvo más remedio que buscar un nuevo arrendatario. Era cosa sabida en las dos parroquias que el plan del caballero se había frustrado a consecuencia de la negativa de los Poyser, que no quisieron aceptar sus condiciones, y en todas las granjas de la vecindad se discutieron las verdades de la señora Poyser con un entusiasmo que aumentaba gracias a la repetición frecuente. Las nuevas de que Bonaparte volvía de Egipto eran relativamente insípidas, y la derrota de los franceses en Italia carecía de importancia al lado de la que sufrió el viejo caballero ante la señora Poyser. El señor Irwine había oído una versión distinta del hecho de labios de cada uno de sus feligreses con excepción de los habitantes del cazadero. Pero, como siempre, evitó con habilidad cualquier disputa con el señor Donnithorne y no pudo darse el placer de reírse del chasco del viejo con nadie más que con su propia madre, la cual declaró que, si sus medios se lo permitían, de buena gana concedería una pensión vitalicia a la señora Poyser; no obstante, como compensación, quiso invitarla a fin de oír de sus labios un relato de la escena ocurrida.

—No, no, mamá —dijo el señor Irwine—. Eso ha sido un acto de justicia irregular por parte de la señora Poyser, y un magistrado como yo no debe apoyar este proceder. Tampoco debe saberse que yo estoy enterado del asunto, pues perdería la poca influencia que tengo sobre el anciano.

—Pues bien, me gusta esa mujer bastante más que sus quesos de crema —dijo la señora Irwine—. Posee el ánimo de tres hombres, y tiene una lengua afilada.

—¡Ya lo creo! Su lengua corta como una navaja de afeitar. Además, su conversación es muy original. Es una de esas inteligencias no cultivadas que suministran a una comarca toda clase de proverbios. Ya le dije lo que una vez oí de sus labios refiriéndose a Craig: «Creo que se parece a un gallo que está convencido que el sol sale todos los días con el único objeto de oírle cantar». Es una fábula de Esopo en una sola frase.

—De todos modos será muy desagradable que el viejo no les renueve su arrendamiento el próximo día de San Miguel. ¿No te parece?

—Quizás sí lo haga. Además, Poyser es un arrendatario tan bueno, que sin duda Donnithorne lo pensará dos veces y digerirá su malhumor antes de echarlos. Pero si les da el aviso el día de la Virgen, Arthur y yo removeremos cielo y tierra para hacerle cambiar de opinión. No conviene que se marchen unos feligreses tan antiguos.

—Nadie sabe lo que ocurrirá antes del día de la Virgen —dijo la señora Irwine—. El día del cumpleaños de Arthur me pareció que el viejo estaba un poco débil. Ya sabes que tiene ochenta y tres años, de modo que la edad es más que suficiente… Sólo las mujeres deben vivir tantos años.

—Siempre y cuando tengan hijos solteros, que se verían perdidos sin ellas —contestó el señor Irwine riéndose y besando la mano de su madre.

También la señora Poyser contestó a los temores de su marido diciéndole que nadie sabía lo que podía ocurrir antes del día de la Virgen. Esta era una de aquellas proposiciones generales e innegables que, por lo común, se expresan para dar un sentido particular también innegable. Pero realmente sería pensar muy mal

de la naturaleza humana si se considerase como ofensa criminal imaginar la muerte del mismo rey cuando éste hubiese ya cumplido los ochenta y tres años. De ser así, solamente los bretones más estúpidos podrían ser súbditos reales.

Aparte de este presentimiento, las cosas marcharon como de costumbre en casa de los Poyser. La dueña creyó observar una conducta sorprendente y muy mejorada por parte de Hetty. En realidad, la muchacha parecía tener un carácter mucho más hermético, y a veces no era posible sacarle una palabra del cuerpo; pero, en cambio, pensaba mucho menos en sus trajes y se dedicaba a su trabajo sin que nadie tuviera que recordárselo. Además, resultaba muy notable el hecho de que ya no quisiera salir y de que incluso costase persuadirla de que lo hiciera. También acató la orden de su tía de suprimir las lecciones semanales de costura en el cazadero sin un gruñido. Quizás finalmente la muchacha estuviera interesada por Adam, y también era posible que su repentino deseo de ir a servir se debiese a un disgusto entre ambos que, por suerte, ya debía de haber pasado. Siempre que Adam iba a Hall Farm, Hetty parecía estar más alegre y hablaba más que en otros tiempos; en cambio, cuando el señor Craig u otro de sus pretendientes iba a hacerle una visita, mostraba su malhumor sin disimulo.

Al principio, Adam la observaba con temblorosa ansiedad, que pronto desapareció para dar lugar a la sorpresa y a una esperanza deliciosa. Cinco días después de entregarle la carta de Arthur, se aventuró a volver a la granja, no sin temer que su visita resultase penosa para la joven. Al llegar no la encontró en la casa y se sentó a hablar con el señor y la señora Poyser por espacio de unos minutos, temiendo a cada momento que le dijesen que Hetty estaba enferma. Pero en breve oyó los ligeros pasos que tan bien conocía, y cuando la señora Poyser dijo «¿Dónde has estado, Hetty?», Adam se vio obligado a dar media vuelta, aunque temió verla muy cambiada. Y casi se sobresaltó al notar que sonreía como si le mirase con satisfacción y que a primera vista tenía el mismo aspecto de siempre, a excepción de que llevaba un gorro, cosa que nunca había hecho antes. Pero al fijarse más en ella mientras iba de un lado para otro o se sentaba a trabajar, notó que, en efecto, había sufrido un cambio. Sus mejillas estaban tan sonrosadas como siempre y sonreía de la misma manera, pero en sus ojos había algo distinto, así como también en la expresión de su cara y en todos sus movimientos. Adam creyó que notaba en ella algo más duro y menos infantil.

«¡Pobre chiquilla —se dijo—, siempre ocurre igual! La pobrecilla ha tenido el primer disgusto de su vida, pero es animosa y lo soporta bien, gracias a Dios».

A medida que trascurrieron las semanas, observó que ella parecía muy complacida al verle, que volvía hacia él su hermoso rostro como para darle a entender la alegría con que le acogía, y luego se dedicaba a su trabajo con la misma tranquilidad de siempre, sin dar muestras de ningún pesar, de modo que él empezó a creer que los sentimientos de la joven con respecto a Arthur habían sido menos profundos de lo que se imaginara en el primer momento de indignación y de alarma, y que ella, gracias a su imaginación infantil, pudo creer que Arthur la amaba y que se casaría con ella, aunque luego se había curado de esa locura. Y quizás se debía todo, según él llegó a esperar en sus momentos de mayor confianza, a que lentamente el corazón de la joven se inclinaba hacia el hombre que, como le constaba, sentía por ella un amor serio y profundo.

Tal vez podrá creer el lector que Adam no era muy sagaz en sus interpretaciones y que hacía mal en enamorarse de una muchacha que, en realidad, no tema otra cualidad que su belleza, y a la que él atribuía toda clase de virtudes, procurando incluso disculparla por haberse enamorado de otro, y esperando sus miradas bondadosas, del mismo modo que un perro aguarda que los ojos de su amo se vuelvan hacia él. Pero en una cosa tan compleja como la naturaleza humana es casi imposible fijar reglas sin excepción. Desde luego me consta que, por regla general, los hombres sensibles se enamoran de las mujeres más espirituales que conocen, y que son capaces de ver claro a través de los bonitos engaños de las hermosas coquetas sin creerse nunca amados cuando no lo son, dejando de amar en las ocasiones oportunas y casándose, al fin, con la mujer que más les conviene. En una palabra, se granjean la aprobación de todas las muchachas solteras de su vecindad. Pero, de vez en cuando, se presenta una excepción de esta regla, y mi amigo Adam era una de ellas. Por mi parte, no por eso le respeto menos. Y hasta llego a creer que el amor profundo que sentía por la hermosa Hetty procedía del mismo vigor de su naturaleza y no de ninguna debilidad.

Nuestro buen Adam no tenía bonitas palabras para expresar sus sentimientos por Hetty; era incapaz de disfrazar así el misterio dándole una apariencia de conocimiento; consideraba, con la mayor franqueza, que su amor era un misterio, y sólo sabía que la contemplación y el recuerdo de la joven le conmovían profundamente, actuando en todo su amor y en toda su ternura, así como en su fe y en su valor. ¿Cómo podía, pues, imaginarse ningún egoísmo, dureza o mezquindad en la joven? Él creó la mente que, según pensaba, era la de ella, y se la imaginó generosa, tierna y cariñosa.

Las esperanzas que sentía con respecto a Hetty suavizaron un poco su opinión sobre Arthur. Estaba seguro de que las atenciones de éste con la joven habían debido de ser muy ligeras; desde luego no tendría que habérselas tributado, dada la posición social de Arthur; era también probable que no hubiesen constituido nada más que un juego que a él le cegó por miedo al peligro, pero que, al mismo tiempo, le impidió causar una impresión profunda en el corazón de Hetty. A medida que se renovaron las esperanzas de felicidad en el corazón de Adam, empezaron a morir su indignación y sus celos. Hetty no era desgraciada, y hasta llegó a creer que ella le manifestaba mayor simpatía que antes, de modo que, algunas veces, cruzaba por la mente de Adam la idea de que incluso la amistad con Arthur, que creyó muerta, podría revivir, y que, en lo venidero, no tendría que despedirse de aquellos magníficos bosques, sino que los querría más porque pertenecían a su amigo. Aquella nueva promesa de felicidad, que inundó su espíritu inmediatamente después del estallido de dolor, causó un agradable efecto en el joven, que estaba acostumbrado a las penalidades y a las esperanzas moderadas. ¿Acaso le sería al fin propicia la suerte? Así lo parecía, porque a principios de noviembre Jonathan Burge, viendo que era imposible reemplazar a Adam, se decidió a ofrecerle una participación en sus negocios sin otra condición que la de continuar dedicándole sus energías y renunciar a establecerse por su cuenta. Tanto si quería casarse con la hija de su patrono como si se casaba con otra mujer, Adam se había hecho demasiado necesario para que se pudiera prescindir de él, pues la inteligencia del joven era mucho más importante para Burge que la misma habilidad de sus manos; además, el hecho de que se le hubiese encomendado la administración de los bosques constituía una diferencia muy escasa con respecto a sus servicios, puesto que cuando se tuviera que comprar alguna madera del caballero sería muy fácil apelar a una tercera persona. Adam vio cómo se ampliaban sus horizontes de un trabajo próspero, en el que siempre pensó con ambición. Podría llegar quizás a construir un puente, el edificio de un ayuntamiento o una fábrica, porque siempre se dijo que el negocio de construcción de Jonathan Burge era como una bellota capaz de ser la madre de un enorme roble. Por eso, al oír tales proposiciones, dio la mano a Burge y regresó a su casa con la mente llena de felices ideas, a las cuales estaba asociada, huelga decirlo, la deliciosa imagen de su adorada.

Adam podría ya tomar una casa para él solo y pasar lo suficiente a su madre para que continuase viviendo en la antigua; sus esperanzas justificarían su próximo casamiento, y si Dinah quisiera aceptar a Seth, su madre viviría, quizás, más contenta estando separada de Adam. Pero se recomendó a sí mismo no obrar con precipitación ni poner a prueba los sentimientos de Hetty hasta que tuviesen tiempo de fortalecerse. Al día siguiente, al salir de la iglesia, iría a Hall Farm a comunicarles estas noticias. Estaba seguro de que el señor Poyser se pondría más contento que si le diesen un billete de cinco libras esterlinas, y también podría observar si Hetty se alegraba. Con todas las cosas que llenaban su mente, el tiempo pasaría rápido, y la vehemencia que en los últimos tiempos había llegado a dominarle no le obligaría a pronunciar palabras prematuras. Pero cuando llegó a su casa y comunicó a su madre tales noticias mientras cenaba, la pobre mujer casi lloró de alegría y quiso obligarle a que comiese el doble de lo acostumbrado para celebrar su buena suerte. Luego Adam no pudo dejar de prepararla, con cariño, para el cambio que se avecinaba, diciéndole que la antigua casa sería muy pequeña para que todos ellos continuasen habitándola.

XXXIV

El noviazgo

El domingo siguiente fue muy seco y realmente agradable, teniendo en cuenta que era el 2 de noviembre. El cielo estaba nublado, pero las nubes se hallaban a gran altura y el viento era tan suave que las hojas amarillentas que se veían bajo los setos sólo caían por estar ya secas. A pesar de todo, la señora Poyser no fue a la iglesia, pues tenía un resfriado muy fuerte; dos inviernos atrás había tenido que guardar cama durante varias semanas a causa de un gran constipado. En vista de que su mujer no iba a la iglesia, el señor Poyser consideró que lo mejor que podía hacer era quedarse a su vez en casa para acompañarla.

Quizás no hubiese podido explicar claramente las razones de tal resolución, pero ya se sabe que nuestras convicciones más firmes dependen, en determinados casos, de impresiones sutiles que apenas se pueden expresar con palabras. Lo cierto es que ningún individuo de la familia Poyser fue a la iglesia aquella tarde, a excepción de Hetty y de los niños. No obstante, Adam se sintió lo bastante atrevido para reunirse con ellos después del servicio religioso y manifestó su deseo de acompañarles a casa. Mientras atravesaron el pueblo pareció ocuparse tan sólo de Marty y de Tommy, hablándoles de las ardillas que había en el bosque y asegurándoles que los llevaría allí algún día. Pero una vez hubieron llegado a los campos, les preguntó cuál de los dos hermanos corría más, y les propuso hacer una carrera para ver quién llegaba antes a casa, prometiendo que el vencedor iría con él al bosque antes que el vencido. Sin embargo, puso la condición de que Tommy saliese primero por ser el más pequeño.

Nunca Adam se había sentido tan decidido como aquel día. En cuanto los muchachos se hubieron alejado, se volvió para mirar a la joven y dijo:

—¿Quiere apoyarse en mi brazo, Hetty?

Pronunció estas palabras con tono de súplica, como si ya hubiese hecho esta misma petición y ella se hubiera negado. Hetty lo miró sonriendo y en el acto pasó su redondo brazo por el del joven. Desde luego eso a ella no le importaba gran cosa, pero comprendió que para Adam tenía mucho significado, y por su parte deseaba que el joven continuase manifestándole su amor. Tampoco latió más deprisa su corazón mientras contemplaba tristemente los setos casi desprovistos de hojas y los campos labrados; pero Adam, por su parte, apenas se daba cuenta de que andaba. Se dijo que Hetty notaría la ligera presión que él ejercía sobre su brazo; las palabras se precipitaban a sus labios, pero no se atrevía a pronunciarlas, y así, guardó silencio mientras atravesaban aquel campo. La tranquila paciencia con que había esperado el amor de Hetty, contentándose con verla y pensar en el futuro, le había abandonado desde el terrible choque que experimentara tres meses antes. La agitación de los celos dio a su pasión una nueva intranquilidad y casi no podía soportar el temor y la incertidumbre. Pero si bien no se sentía con fuerzas para hablar de su amor a Hetty, por lo menos le refiriría sus esperanzas y observaría si le gustaba. Por eso, en cuanto fue dueño de sí mismo, dijo:

—Voy a comunicar a su tío algunas noticias que le sorprenderán, Hetty, y creo que también las oirá con gusto.

—¿De qué se trata? —preguntó la joven con indiferencia.

—Pues de que el señor Burge me ha ofrecido una participación en sus negocios, y yo he aceptado.

Se observó un cambio en el rostro de la joven, aunque sin duda no se debió a la impresión agradable de esta noticia, sino a que sintió una repentina alarma, porque había oído tantas veces a su tío decir que Adam podría casarse con Mary Burge y tener una participación en los negocios en cuanto expresara tales deseos que, inmediatamente, se le ocurrió pensar que Adam había renunciado a su amor a causa de lo sucedido

últimamente, y decidido, en cambio, casarse con Mary Burge. Con esa idea en la cabeza y antes de que la razón le indicase su imposibilidad, se sintió defraudada y más sola que nunca. Se dijo también que la única persona en quien había confiado la abandonaba a su vez, y eso le llenó los ojos de lágrimas. Los tenía entonces fijos en el suelo, pero Adam pudo verle el rostro, notó las lágrimas y exclamó:

—¡Hetty! ¡Querida Hetty! ¿Por qué llora?

Mientras tanto recorrió con su pensamiento todas las causas posibles del llanto de la joven y, por fin, dio con la verdad. Hetty creía que él iba a casarse con Mary Burge y quizás esta suposición le producía pena. Adam abandonó en el acto toda precaución y empezó a temblar de alegría. Luego se inclinó hacia ella, le tomó la mano y dijo:

—Ahora ya puedo pensar en casarme, Hetty, puesto que me será posible dar algunas comodidades a mi esposa; pero, si usted no me quiere, por mi parte no pensaré en ninguna otra mujer.

Hetty levantó los ojos y le sonrió a través de sus lágrimas, como hiciera con Arthur Donnithorne la primera noche en el bosque, cuando se figuró que no acudiría y, sin embargo, al final se presentó ante ella. Sentía un débil triunfo, y sus grandes ojos negros y sus dulces labios eran tan hermosos como siempre, quizás más que nunca, porque últimamente Hetty se había convertido ya en una adorable mujer. Adam apenas podía creer en la felicidad de aquel momento. Su mano derecha sujetó la izquierda de la joven y la oprimió contra su corazón mientras se inclinaba hacia ella.

—¿Me ama de veras, Hetty? ¿Querrá ser mi esposa para amarme y cuidarme mientras viva?

Hetty no contestó, pero el rostro de Adam estaba muy próximo al suyo, y ella apoyó su redonda mejilla en la de él como podría haberlo hecho un gatito. Quería ser acariciada y forjarse la ilusión de que Arthur estaba a su lado.

Adam ya no necesitó oír palabra alguna después de notar aquel movimiento de la joven, y los dos apenas cruzaron otra palabra durante el resto del paseo. Él preguntó únicamente:

—¿Me permite que se lo diga a sus tíos, Hetty?

Y ella, sonriendo, le contestó:

—Sí.

Aquella noche el hogar de Hall Farm proyectó sus rojos resplandores sobre los alegres rostros de los reunidos, cuando Hetty subió a su cuarto y Adam aprovechó la oportunidad para comunicar al matrimonio y al abuelo que ya se sentía con fuerzas para mantener a una esposa y que Hetty le había aceptado.

—Espero que no tendrá ninguna objeción que oponer a nuestro noviazgo —dijo Adam—. Aunque todavía soy pobre, ella no carecerá de nada mientras yo pueda trabajar.

—Nada de eso —replicó el señor Poyser mientras el abuelo se inclinaba hacia adelante y decía a su vez: «Ningún inconveniente, ninguno»—. ¿Qué objeciones podemos hacer contra usted, amigo mío? Nada importa que aún sea pobre, porque hay tanto dinero en su cabeza como en campo labrado; sólo falta dejar pasar algún tiempo. Y como quizás no tenga lo bastante para empezar, nosotros le ayudaremos a amueblar la casa. Tenemos bastantes plumas y grandes piezas de tela, ¿verdad?

Dirigió esta pregunta a la señora Poyser, que estaba envuelta en un chal y demasiado ronca para hablar con facilidad. Al principio se limitó a mover la cabeza de arriba a abajo, pero luego fue incapaz de resistir la tentación de ser más explícita.

—Mal iríamos si no tuviésemos abundancia de plumas y de tela, cuando jamás he vendido un pollo sin desplumar y el torno de hilar no para ningún día de la semana.

—Ven, hija mía —dijo el señor Poyser cuando bajó Hetty—. Ven a darnos un beso para que te deseemos buena suerte.

Hetty se acercó despacio y besó a su corpulento y bondadoso tío.

—Ahora —dijo éste dándole cariñosas palmadas en la espalda— ve a besar a tu tía y a tu abuelo. Veré con tanto gusto tu casamiento como si fueses mi propia hija, y lo mismo opina tu tía, porque después de los siete años que has vivido con nosotros, te quiere de todo corazón. Pero —añadió en broma cuando Hetty hubo besado a su tía y al anciano— también Adam querrá un beso; no tengo ninguna duda de ello, y además le corresponde en derecho.

Hetty se volvió sonriendo mientras el señor Poyser exclamaba:

—Venga, Adam, y bese a Hetty.

Adam se puso en pie ruborizado como una doncella, a pesar de ser un muchacho alto y fuerte, y rodeando a Hetty con un brazo, se inclinó y la besó en la frente.

Aquella escena a la luz del hogar resultaba muy simpática. La cocina no estaba alumbrada por bujías, que eran innecesarias, pues el fuego resplandeciente se reflejaba en el pulimentado roble y en los utensilios de peltre. Por otra parte nadie quería trabajar durante la tarde del domingo, y hasta la misma Hetty sentía

cierto contento rodeada como estaba de tanto amor. El afecto de Adam y sus caricias no despertaron su pasión ni satisfacían su vanidad, sin embargo era lo mejor que le ofrecía la vida y además le prometía algún cambio.

Antes de que se marchase Adam, hubo grandes discusiones sobre la posibilidad de encontrar una casa para que la habitase el nuevo matrimonio. No había ninguna desocupada, a excepción de una inmediata a la de Will Maskery, o sea en el pueblo, pero tenía el inconveniente de ser demasiado pequeña. El señor Poyser insistía en que lo mejor sería conseguir que Seth y su madre se trasladasen de domicilio y dejasen la antigua casa para Adam, quien podría agrandarla pues tenía bastante terreno destinado a depósito de maderas y a jardín; pero Adam se resistía a que su madre abandonase la antigua vivienda.

—Bueno, bueno —dijo por fin el señor Poyser—. No tenemos necesidad alguna de dejarlo todo decidido esta misma noche. Hay que darse tiempo para reflexionar. De todos modos no os podréis casar antes de Pascua. A mí no me gustan los noviazgos largos; sin embargo es preciso esperar algún tiempo para prepararlo todo como es debido.

—No hay duda —dijo a su vez la señora Poyser con voz ronca—. Los cristianos no pueden casarse como si fuesen pájaros.

—Por mi parte no estoy nada contento —dijo el señor Poyser—, pues pienso que quizás nos obliguen a dejar la hacienda y nos veamos forzados a trasladarnos a treinta kilómetros de distancia.

—¡Dios mío! —dijo el viejo mirando al suelo y levantando las crispadas manos a la altura de su blanca cabeza—. Me será muy doloroso abandonar este lugar para que me entierren en una parroquia desconocida. Además, en otra parte te harán pagar el doble, por lo menos —añadió mirando a su hijo.

—En fin, padre, no hay que apurarse por ahora —dijo Martin hijo—. Aún es posible que venga el capitán y nos ponga en paz con el viejo. Yo confío mucho en eso, pues sé que el capitán es hombre capaz de arreglar estas cosas.

XXXV

El temor oculto

Adam estuvo muy atareado durante el tiempo que medió entre los meses de noviembre y febrero, y raras veces, si se exceptúan los domingos, pudo ver a su prometida. Sin embargo, en aquella temporada fue muy feliz, pues veía acercarse el día de su casamiento, ya definitivamente señalado para celebrarse en los primeros días del mes de marzo. A la casa vieja se habían añadido dos nuevas habitaciones, porque finalmente se convino que su madre y su hermano vivirían con ellos. Lisbeth se echó a llorar de tal manera al pensar que tendría que dejar a Adam, que éste rogó a Hetty que, por amor a él, consintiera en el deseo de la anciana de vivir con ellos.

Con gran alegría por parte de Adam la joven aceptó, porque su mente estaba en aquel momento agobiada por otros temores y poco le importaban los caprichos o deseos de Lisbeth. Adam se consoló muy pronto del disgusto que le dio Seth cuando, al regresar de su visita a Snowfield, le dijo que su empeño había sido inútil, pues Dinah no pensaba siquiera en casarse. Y cuando Adam dijo a su madre que Hetty consentía en vivir con todos y que ya no habría necesidad de pensar en separarse, la anciana le contestó en un tono más alegre que nunca desde que se habló de su casamiento:

—Bueno, hijo mío; así seré feliz. Yo no me ocuparé más que de los trabajos pesados para que ella no se canse y, además, no tendremos que repartir la vajilla, que siempre he visto en los mismos estantes.

En el cielo de la felicidad de Adam sólo había una nube: a veces Hetty parecía ser desgraciada. Pero a todas sus preguntas ansiosas y tiernas, ella contestaba con voz firme que estaba muy satisfecha y que no deseaba nada más. Y después de estas palabras, se mostraba más alegre que de costumbre. Tal vez sólo estaba algo cansada del trabajo y agobiada por la ansiedad, porque poco después de Navidad la señora Poyser cogió otro resfriado, que se convirtió muy pronto en una inflamación de los pulmones, y esta enfermedad la retuvo en cama durante todo el mes de enero. Hetty tuvo que cuidar del gobierno de la casa y hasta suplir a Molly mientras ésta cuidaba a su señora; y, al parecer, la joven se entregó en cuerpo y alma a sus nuevas funciones con todo el ardor de que era capaz, de modo que el señor Poyser decía a Adam que sin duda se proponía demostrar cuán buena ama de casa sería; pero como al mismo tiempo temía que se excediese en su trabajo, comprendía que debería gozar de algún descanso en cuanto su tía estuviese restablecida.

Este deseado acontecimiento ocurrió en la primera quincena de febrero, cuando ya el tiempo fue más benigno y empezó a fundirse la nieve en las montañas. Pocos días después de que su tía bajase a la cocina, Hetty fue a Treddleston a comprar algunas cosas que se necesitaban para la boda, y la señora Poyser la regañó por no haberse acordado de ello antes, observando que si se hubiese tratado de algún traje o de alguna gala no habría dejado de ir.

Eran las diez cuando Hetty salió, de modo que la escarcha de las primeras horas de la mañana se había fundido ya. Los buenos días de febrero tienen en sí una esperanza más alegre que otros cualesquiera del año. Resulta agradable exponerse a los suaves rayos del sol, contemplar el paciente trabajo de los caballos de labranza, que dan la vuelta en el extremo del surco, y pensar, al mismo tiempo, que ya se acercan los hermosos días del año. Los pájaros parecen comprenderlo también, y sus voces son tan diáfanas como el aire claro de la mañana. No hay todavía hojas en los árboles y en los setos, pero, en cambio, los pastos tienen un tono verde brillante que contrasta singularmente con el color pardo de las ramas y de la tierra recién labrada. Entonces el mundo parece magnífico y resulta delicioso recorrer los valles y hasta trasponer las montañas. Eso he pensado muchas veces al verme en países extranjeros, donde los campos y los bosques

se han presentado a mis ojos con el mismo aspecto que los de nuestro Loamshire inglés; he visto la tierra rica y recién labrada con igual cuidado y los bosques cubriendo las suaves pendientes para morir junto a los verdes prados; pero, de pronto, he divisado a la orilla del camino algo que me ha recordado que no estoy en Loamshire. He visto la imagen de una gran agonía, la agonía de la Cruz. Quizás la he descubierto junto a las apretadas flores del manzano o alumbrada por el sol, al lado de los campos de trigo, o tal vez al dar la vuelta junto al bosque e inmediata a un manso arroyo, y seguro que si en este mundo hubiese un viajero que no conociese la historia de la vida del hombre, aquella imagen de agonía le parecería fuera de lugar al verla rodeada de la alegre naturaleza. Ignoraría, quizás, que detrás de las flores del manzano, entre el dorado trigo o también debajo de los arbustos, pudiese existir un corazón humano angustiado, una lozana joven que ignorase dónde podría hallar refugio contra la vergüenza; y no comprendería nuestra vida mucho más que un cabritillo extraviado, que anduviera errante, a la caída de la tarde, por entre los solitarios brezales; y, sin embargo, se hallaría junto a una de las mayores amarguras que existen.

Tales cosas se ven, a veces, ocultas entre los soleados campos y detrás de los vergeles floridos. Y el rumor del manso arroyo cuando uno se acerca a un pequeño arbusto puede confundirse con un desesperado sollozo humano. No es de extrañar que la religión del hombre comprenda tanta tristeza y tampoco que necesite a un Dios que sufra.

Hetty, cubierta por su roja capa y su caliente gorro, y llevando en la mano un cesto, se dirigía hacia un portillo que daba al camino de Treddleston, pero no gozaba de la alegría de la luz del sol, ni pensaba, esperanzada, en el acontecimiento que se avecinaba. Apenas se daba cuenta del resplandor del astro diurno; además, hacía varias semanas que tenía algo que la hacía temblar y estremecerse. Sólo deseaba verse en la carretera a fin de andar despacio, sin preocuparse de su propio aspecto, y entregarse a sus tristes pensamientos; al atravesar el portón desembocó en un sendero que corría entre los campos y los setos espesos. Sus oscuros ojos miraban sin ver los campos. Pero en aquellos ojos no había lágrimas, ya que las derramaba abundantes por las noches antes de acostarse. Junto al siguiente portillo el sendero se bifurcaba, ofreciéndole dos caminos, uno de ellos cruzaba los setos y volvería a conducirla al camino principal, en tanto que el otro pasaba por entre los campos y la llevaría hacia las tierras de pasto, donde no vería a nadie. Escogió este último y empezó a andar un poco más deprisa, como si, de pronto, hubiese pensado en el objeto hacia el cual valía la pena encaminarse cuanto antes. Pronto se halló entre los prados, que se inclinaban en suave pendiente, y dejó el terreno llano para descender por una bajada. Más allá había un bosquecillo y se encaminó hacia él. Pero no era un bosquecillo, sino un estanque oscuro y rodeado de arbustos lleno de las lluvias del invierno, hasta el punto que algunos de los arbustos más pequeños estaban casi cubiertos por el agua. Se sentó en la orilla y sus ojos, como si obedeciesen la orden reiterada de un cerebro obsesionado, parecían tratar de averiguar qué clase de lecho sería aquél para una novia.

No, no tuvo valor para saltar a aquel frío lecho; y aunque se hubiese decidido, podrían encontrarla allí y descubrir la razón de su suicidio. Sólo le quedaba un recurso: marcharse a donde no pudieran encontrarla. A partir del triste día de su compromiso con Adam, esperó y esperó con la ciega y vaga esperanza de que ocurriese «algo»; pero ya no le era posible esperar más. Toda la fuerza de su carácter se había concentrado en un esfuerzo encaminado a disimular y se horrorizaba de todo aquello que pudiera traicionar su miserable secreto. Varias veces tuvo la idea de escribir a Arthur para comunicarle lo que le ocurría, pero siempre acabó por desistir. Él no podría hacer nada en su favor, ni protegerla contra el descubrimiento y el respeto de sus parientes y vecinos que, de nuevo, constituían todo su mundo, ahora que ya se había desvanecido su loco sueño. Su imaginación no esperaba ya ninguna felicidad proveniente de Arthur, porque éste no podía hacer nada que satisficiera o calmase su orgullo. No. Algo ocurriría, «debía» ocurrir algo que la liberase de aquel temor. En las almas jóvenes, infantiles e ignorantes, siempre hay esta ciega confianza en alguna casualidad imprevista, y es tan difícil que un muchacho o una niña crean que puede ocurrirles una tremenda desgracia como figurarse que han de morir.

Pero la necesidad la agobiaba; la fecha de su matrimonio estaba cercana y no podía continuar asida a su ciega esperanza. No tenía más remedio que huir, ocultarse donde no la encontrasen sus parientes; pero el terror de ir errante por el mundo, del cual no sabía nada, hizo que la posibilidad de ir en busca de Arthur la tranquilizase en parte. Se sentía tan indefensa y tan incapaz de cuidar de su propio futuro que la esperanza de confiar en él le ofrecía un consuelo mucho más fuerte que su orgullo. Y mientras estaba sentada junto al estanque, se estremecía al contemplar el agua fría y oscura; la esperanza de que él la recibiese con ternura, de que la amase y la amparase, le proporcionaba un calor agradable que, por el momento, le dejaba indiferente con respecto a todo lo demás. Y así empezó a pensar exclusivamente en su proyecto de fuga.

Pocos días atrás había recibido una carta de Dinah llena de bondadosas palabras acerca del próximo matrimonio, del que se había enterado por medio de Seth; y cuando Hetty leyó la carta, en voz alta, a su

tío, éste dijo: «Me gustaría mucho que volviese Dinah, porque sería un gran consuelo para tu tía, en cuanto tú te hayas marchado. Creo que harías muy bien, hija mía, en ir a verla en cuanto puedas, para persuadirla de que vuelva contigo. Tal vez la convencerías diciéndole que su tía la necesita y vencerías su resistencia a abandonar su residencia actual». A Hetty no le gustó la idea de ir a Snowfield y tampoco deseaba ver a Dinah, de modo que contestó: «Está muy lejos, tío». Pero ahora se dijo que aquella visita le serviría de pretexto para huir. Al regresar a su casa le diría a su tía que quería ir a pasar una semana o diez días en Snowfield, y luego, en cuanto llegase a Stoniton, donde nadie la conocía, preguntaría por el coche que pudiese llevarla a Windsor. Arthur estaba allí; ella iría a su encuentro.

En cuanto Hetty decidió este plan, se puso en pie, tomó el cesto y emprendió el camino hacia Treddleston a fin de comprar las cosas que le habían encargado para la boda, aun cuando sabía que nunca las necesitaría. Y se dijo que debía tener cuidado de no despertar ninguna sospecha acerca de su proyectada fuga.

La señora Poyser se sorprendió agradablemente al saber que Hetty iría a visitar a Dinah con objeto de procurar traérsela consigo y convencerla de que se quedase en la casa después de su casamiento. Puesto que el tiempo era bueno, cuanto antes se marchase, mejor; al llegar por la noche, Adam dijo que si Hetty podía salir a la mañana siguiente, él procuraría acompañarla hasta Treddleston para dejarla en el coche de Stoniton.

—Mucho me gustaría ir contigo para cuidarte, Hetty —dijo a la mañana siguiente apoyado en la portezuela del coche—, mas espero que, a lo sumo, tardarás una semana, aunque este tiempo se me hará muy largo.

Al mismo tiempo la miraba con cariño, y su fuerte mano estrechó la de la joven. Hetty experimentó cierta sensación de protección al verse ante Adam, sensación a la que ya estaba acostumbrada. ¡Ojalá hubiese podido deshacer lo pasado y no haber conocido otro amor que su tranquilo afecto por Adam! Y las lágrimas inundaron sus ojos cuando le dirigió otra mirada.

«Que Dios premie su bondad conmigo», murmuró Adam mientras emprendía el camino de regreso.

Pero Hetty no derramó aquellas lágrimas por Adam, ni tampoco por el dolor que éste sentiría en cuanto se convenciese de que ella había huido para siempre, sino que lloró por su propio infortunio que la alejaba de aquel hombre valeroso y tierno, que le ofrecía su vida entera, y por la desdicha que, a su pesar, la arrojaba como indefensa mendiga a los pies del hombre que consideraría una desgracia el hecho de que ella se viese obligada a buscar su protección.

A las tres de la tarde de aquel día, cuando Hetty estaba en el coche que había de llevarla, según decían, a Leicester, es decir, todavía a gran distancia de Windsor, presintió vagamente que quizás realizaba aquel pesado viaje en dirección a una nueva desdicha.

Sin embargo, Arthur estaba en Windsor. Seguro que no se enfadaría con ella y, si no continuaba demostrándole su cariño, por lo menos la acogería con bondad, como le había prometido.

LIBRO QUINTO

XXXVI

El viaje hacia la esperanza

El viejo cochero de Cakburne, al ver a aquella hermosa joven entre los viajeros del exterior, la invitó a sentarse a su lado y, considerándose en su calidad de cochero y de hombre en la obligación de iniciar el diálogo por medio de una broma, así lo hizo en cuanto hubieron abandonado los mojones indicadores de la proximidad de la población. Después de dar varios latigazos y de dirigir con el rabillo del ojo algunas miradas a Hetty, levantó los labios por encima de la bufanda y exclamó:

—Estoy seguro de que, por lo menos, mide metro ochenta y cinco de alto, ¿no es así?

—¿Quién? —preguntó Hetty algo sobresaltada.

—Pues el novio a quien ha dejado atrás o al lado del cual se dirige ahora.

Hetty se sonrojó y luego palideció, figurándose que aquel cochero sabía algo de ella. Sin duda conocería a Adam y le diría adonde había ido, pues para los campesinos es difícil creer que las personas notables de su propia parroquia no son conocidas en las demás y, de igual modo, Hetty no podía imaginarse que una broma casual coincidiese de tal modo con la verdad. Por esa razón se quedó demasiado asustada para contestar.

—¡Vamos, vamos! —dijo el cochero al observar que su chanza no tenía el éxito esperado—. No se lo tome en serio, y si se ha portado mal ese muchacho, busque otro novio. Una hermosa joven como usted puede tener los que quiera.

Hetty se tranquilizó un tanto al observar que el cochero ya no aludía a sus asuntos personales, pero no se atrevió a preguntarle sobre el camino que había de seguir para ir a Windsor. Le dijo que iba a poca distancia de Stoniton, y así, en cuanto el coche se detuvo ante una posada, se apresuró a alejarse hacia otra parte de la ciudad. Al forjar el plan de irse a Windsor no previo ninguna dificultad, pues sólo pensaba en huir; y cuando hubo logrado su propósito gracias a la fingida visita a Dinah, se concentró en su encuentro con Arthur y también imaginó la acogida que éste le dispensaría sin preocuparse para nada de los incidentes del viaje. Era demasiado ignorante para prever ningún detalle, y con el dinero que llevaba, o sea tres guineas, se creyó ampliamente provista. Solamente al conocer el coste del pasaje en el coche que iba a Stoniton empezó a alarmarse con respecto al resto del viaje, y entonces, por vez primera, comprendió su ignorancia acerca de los lugares que había de atravesar para llegar a Windsor. Angustiada por esta nueva alarma, atravesó las tristes calles de Stoniton y, por fin, se metió en una mala posada en busca de un alojamiento barato para pasar la noche. Una vez allí preguntó al posadero si podía indicarle el camino que había de seguir para llegar a Windsor.

—No lo sé muy bien —contestó el interpelado—. Windsor debe de estar muy cerca de Londres, porque el rey vive allí. De todos modos, convendrá que vaya primero a Ashby, es decir, hacia el sur. Pero entre esta ciudad y Londres hay tantos lugares como casas en Stoniton. Por mi parte, nunca he viajado. Pero ¿cómo se explica que una muchacha tan joven como usted se disponga a emprender tan largo viaje?

—Voy a reunirme con mi hermano, que es soldado y está en Windsor —dijo Hetty asustada por la pregunta del posadero—. No tengo bastante dinero para pagar mi pasaje en el coche. ¿Cree que mañana por la mañana encontraré algún carro que se dirija a Ashby?

—¡Oh! Hay muchos carros, pero no es posible saber con certeza de dónde salen. Tampoco puede recorrer la ciudad para averiguarlo y, por consiguiente, sería mejor que echase a andar; no hay duda de que, por fin, hallaría en la carretera algún carro que se dirigiese allá.

Cada una de estas palabras contribuía a desalentar más y más a Hetty; veía que su camino se iba

alargando y hasta llegar a Ashby le parecía ya algo difícil. Tal vez emplease un día entero en llegar allí y, sin embargo, apenas tenía importancia comparado con el resto del viaje. Pero debía hacerlo y llegar junto a Arthur. ¡Oh, cuánto deseaba encontrar a alguien que le tuviese afecto! Nunca se había levantado por la mañana sin la certeza de ver rostros familiares; por otra parte, el viaje más largo que hizo en su vida fue a Rosseter, montada en la grupa del caballo de su tío. Y he aquí que ahora ella, que meses antes no tenía otro pesar que envidiar una nueva cinta a Mary Burge o la riña de su tía por no haber cuidado a Totty, tenía que emprender un viaje interminable, sola, abandonando su hogar y sin nada más que una trémula y lejana esperanza. Por primera vez, mientras aquella noche estuvo tendida en esa cama extraña y dura, comprendió que su hogar era muy agradable, su tío muy bondadoso con ella y que su suerte en Hayslope, entre las cosas y la gente a quienes conocía —enorgulleciéndose de un traje o de un gorro, sin tener que ocultar nada a nadie—, era precisamente la que habría deseado encontrar al despertarse, diciéndose que aquella huida febril y angustiosa no era más que una corta pesadilla. Con añoranza y pesar pensó en todo lo que había dejado atrás. Sentía su corazón lleno de desgracia y no podía pensar siquiera en los pesares de otras gentes. Y, sin embargo, antes de aquella carta cruel, Arthur fue siempre tierno y cariñoso. Este recuerdo aún le resultaba encantador, a pesar de que era sólo una bebida calmante que le hacía soportable su pena. Porque Hetty no podía concebir otra existencia futura que la de vivir oculta, ya que ni siquiera el amor le ofrecería ningún goce y su propia vida estaría ligada a la vergüenza…

A la mañana siguiente se levantó temprano y, después de desayunar un poco de leche y pan, salió hacia el camino que conducía a Ashby bajo un cielo encapotado, plomizo, con una faja amarillenta en el horizonte como una esperanza que se pierde. El desaliento de su corazón ante la dificultad de su viaje hizo que temiese gastar su dinero, quedándose tan desamparada que no le cupiese otro recurso que pedir limosna; Hetty no sólo era orgullosa por carácter, sino que, además, pertenecía a una clase digna: la que paga la mayor parte de los impuestos en favor de los pobres y que se estremece ante la idea de tener que vivir gracias a esos mismos impuestos. No se le había ocurrido nunca que pudiese obtener algún dinero vendiendo los pendientes y el guardapelo que llevaba consigo, y así hizo uso de su aritmética y de su conocimiento de los precios para calcular cuántas comidas y cuántos recorridos podría realizar con sus dos guineas y los pocos chelines que le quedaban y que le parecían tener un aspecto melancólico, como si fuesen las pálidas cenizas de las llameantes monedas de oro.

Al salir de Stoniton anduvo varios kilómetros con relativo ánimo, imponiéndose sucesivamente como meta momentánea algún punto distante, un árbol o un portón, y cuando lo alcanzaba se ponía contenta. Pero en cuanto llegó al mojón indicador de que había recorrido seis kilómetros —el primero que descubrió junto al camino—, sintió gran desaliento al ver cuán poco había avanzado. Estaba fatigadísima y hambrienta, pues si bien acostumbraba a hacer una vida activa, no tenía, en cambio, el hábito de realizar grandes marchas, que producen una fatiga distinta de la actividad cotidiana. Mientras miraba el mojón, sintió algunas gotas de agua que le caían en el rostro; en aquel momento empezaba a llover. Ésta era una nueva complicación que no se le había ocurrido y, anonadada, se sentó en el escalón de un portillo y empezó a sollozar histéricamente. Las primeras penalidades equivalen a la primera vez que probamos una comida amarga. Al principio parece insoportable, pero como no tenemos nada más para calmar el hambre, tomamos otro bocado y, por fin, nos parece posible continuar comiendo. En cuanto Hetty se consoló un poco gracias a sus sollozos, reunió su escaso valor; puesto que llovía, debía esforzarse por llegar a un pueblo donde hallase descanso y cobijo. Poco después, y mientras seguía su fatigosa marcha, oyó el ruido de unas pesadas ruedas a su espalda; se acercaba un carro cubierto y vio que al lado de los caballos iba el carretero chasqueando de vez en cuando su látigo. Lo esperó, diciéndose que si el carretero no era un hombre intratable le rogaría que la dejase subir al carro. Cuando se acercó, el carretero permanecía atrás, pero la joven vio en la parte delantera algo que le dio ánimos. En otro momento cualquiera de su vida no lo habría notado, pero entonces despertó en ella una nueva sensibilidad. Era un perrito de ojos tímidos y de color blanco y marrón, iba sentado en la parte delantera del carro, y temblaba incesantemente. A Hetty no le gustaban mucho los animales, pero en aquel momento le pareció que aquel desgraciado ser tenía muchos puntos en común con ella misma y, sin darse cuenta de la razón, se sintió más animada a hablar al carretero. Este era un hombre corpulento y rojizo que, a guisa de manta, llevaba un saco sobre los hombros.

—¿Me permite que suba al carro si se dirige a Ashby? —preguntó Hetty—. Le pagaré.

—Bueno —dijo aquel enorme individuo sonriendo con la lentitud propia de los hombres de su tipo—. No tengo inconveniente en que suba, aunque sea sin pagar, si no le importa ir encima de unos fardos de lana. ¿De dónde viene? ¿Para qué quiere ir a Ashby?

—Vengo de Stoniton y voy muy lejos, a Windsor.

—¿Para qué?

—Para reunirme con mi hermano, que es soldado y está allí.

—Bueno. Yo no voy más que a Leicester, y ya es bastante lejos; pero le dejaré subir al carro si no tiene mucha prisa. Los caballos no sentirán su peso, como no notan el del perrito que va delante y que recogí en el camino hace cosa de quince días. Creo que es un animal perdido; no hace más que temblar. Deme el cesto, y la haré subir por la parte trasera del carro.

El tenderse sobre unos fardos de lana con una abertura entre las cortinas del toldo para dejar entrar el aire, era un verdadero lujo para Hetty en aquellos momentos, de modo que casi se durmió hasta que el carretero fue a preguntarle si quería bajar para comer un poco. Él mismo se disponía a hacerlo en aquella taberna. Por la noche, y a hora muy avanzada, llegaron a Leicester, y así pasó el segundo día del viaje de Hetty. No gastó más dinero que el necesario para pagar su comida, pero comprendió que le resultaría intolerable viajar con tanta lentitud, de modo que, a la mañana siguiente, se dirigió a la casa de postas con objeto de preguntar si le costaría mucho hacer el viaje en coche, y también cuáles eran las ciudades que había de atravesar para llegar a Windsor. Sí. La distancia era demasiado grande y los coches muy caros, de modo que se vio obligada a renunciar a ellos; pero el anciano empleado de la oficina, conmovido al ver su hermoso y ansioso rostro, le escribió en un papel los nombres de las principales ciudades que debía atravesar. Este fue el único consuelo que tuvo en Leicester, porque los hombres la miraban en las calles y por primera vez en su vida Hetty deseó que nadie se fijara en ella. Emprendió de nuevo el camino, pero aquel día tuvo más suerte, porque pronto la alcanzó un carretero que la llevó a Hinckley, y al haber encontrado una silla de posta de retorno, con un postillón borracho que la asustó guiando los caballos peligrosamente y dirigiéndole observaciones en broma mientras se retorcía sobre la silla, antes de la noche se vio en el corazón de Warwickshire; pero aún, según le dijeron, a cosa de ciento cincuenta kilómetros de Windsor. ¡Oh, qué grande era el mundo y cuánto le costaba realizar aquel viaje! Por equivocación se dirigió a Stratford-on-Avon, porque Stratford figuraba en la lista de poblaciones que le dieron y entonces se enteró que se había desviado bastante de su camino. Hasta el quinto día no llegó a Stony Stratford. Mirando el mapa, este viaje parece muy corto y el lector recordará, quizás, las agradables excursiones que ha hecho junto a las risueñas orillas del Avon; mas para la pobre Hetty fue un trayecto largo y penoso. Le parecía que aquella comarca de campos llanos, de setos y de casas desperdigadas, de pueblos y de ciudades de mayor importancia —todo lo cual resultaba indiferente a sus ojos— había de ser interminable y que ella se vería condenada a vagar por allí por toda la eternidad, esperando junto a las barreras de peaje a que apareciese algún carro, para luego enterarse de que iba a muy poca distancia, quizás al molino, que estaba situado a un kilómetro; además le repugnaba entrar en las tabernas para comer y preguntar, porque siempre estaban llenas de hombres que la miraban y le dirigían bromas torpes. Estaba agotada por la fatiga y por la ansiedad; tenía el rostro muy pálido y más desencajado que durante la temporada que había pasado en casa agobiada por sus temores. Cuando por fin llegó a Stony Stratford, su impaciencia y su cansancio eran ya excesivos para que pensase siquiera en economizar. Decidió tomar el coche para recorrer el resto del viaje, aunque tuviese que quedarse sin dinero. Una vez en Windsor ya no necesitaría nada más que encontrar a Arthur. En cuanto hubo pagado el pasaje en el coche, sólo le quedó un chelín y, al bajar frente a la posada de Green Man, en Windsor, a las doce del día séptimo de su viaje, hambrienta y exhausta, el cochero se le acercó y le rogó que se acordase de él. Llevó la mano al bolsillo y sacó el chelín, pero las lágrimas inundaron sus ojos al pensar que iba a dar lo último que le quedaba para pagar alguna comida que sin duda necesitaba antes de salir en busca de Arthur. Por eso tendió el chelín al cochero, lo miró con los ojos llenos de lágrimas, y le preguntó:

—¿Puede devolverme seis peniques?

—No quiero nada —replicó él con bondadosa rudeza—. Guárdese el chelín.

El posadero de Green Man había presenciado aquella escena, y era hombre cuya glotonería le servía para conservar no sólo su persona, sino también sus buenos sentimientos; aparte de que el hermoso y lloroso rostro de Hetty habría sido capaz de despertar la compasión de cualquiera.

—¡Entre, joven! ¡Entre! —dijo—. Entre a tomar algo. Está cansada y hambrienta. No es difícil adivinarlo.

Condujo a la joven al interior del establecimiento, y le dijo a su esposa:

—Lleva a la sala a esta joven. Está un poco fatigada y no parece feliz del todo.

Hetty se irritaba consigo misma al notar que no podía contener el llanto, pues creía no tener ningún motivo para llorar ya, puesto que estaba en Windsor y no lejos de Arthur.

Contempló con ansiosos y hambrientos ojos el pan, la carne y la cerveza que le sirvió la hostelera, y durante unos minutos olvidó todos sus dolores ante la deliciosa sensación de satisfacer el hambre y recobrar las fuerzas. La hostelera, que se había sentado frente a ella, la miraba con atención mientras comía.

—No está en situación de viajar —dijo fijándose al mismo tiempo en el detalle de que Hetty no llevaba ninguna sortija—. ¿Viene de lejos?

—Sí —contestó Hetty más aliviada cuando hubo comido, aunque aquella pregunta le indicó la conveniencia de dominarse—. Vengo de muy lejos y estoy muy fatigada. Pero ya me encuentro mejor. ¿Podría decirme qué camino he de tomar para ir ahí?

Al mismo tiempo sacó del bolsillo un pedazo de papel. Era el final de la carta de Arthur donde él había escrito sus señas.

Mientras hablaba entró el posadero, quien empezó a mirarla atentamente como hiciera su mujer. Tomó el papel que Hetty tendía a través de la mesa y leyó las señas.

—¿Qué debe hacer en esa casa? —preguntó.

Los posaderos y todas aquellas personas que no tienen asuntos urgentes propios suelen hacer cuantas preguntas pueden antes de proporcionar los informes pedidos.

—Deseo ver a un caballero que está allí —dijo Hetty.

—Allí no hay ningún caballero —replicó el buen hombre—. Está cerrado… hace más de quince días. ¿A qué caballero quería ver? Tal vez pueda indicarle dónde encontrarle.

—Al capitán Donnithorne —contestó Hetty temblorosa, pues su corazón latía de un modo doloroso al ver destruida su esperanza de encontrar inmediatamente a Arthur.

—¿El capitán Donnithorne? Espere un poco —dijo el posadero con lentitud—. ¿No estaba en la milicia de Loamshire? Es un oficial joven y alto, de tez blanca y patillas rojizas. Tiene un criado que se llama Pym.

—¡Sí, sí! —exclamó Hetty—. Ya veo que lo conoce. ¿Dónde está?

—Pues a gran distancia de aquí. La milicia de Loamshire se ha ido a Irlanda. Hace ya quince días que marcharon.

—Mira, se ha desmayado —observó la hostelera apresurándose a sostener a Hetty, que había perdido el sentido y parecía un hermoso cadáver.

La llevaron al sofá y le aflojaron el traje.

—Sospecho que en todo esto hay algo muy desagradable —dijo el posadero mientras iba en busca de agua.

—Bastante se ve lo que hay —dijo la mujer—. Desde luego no se trata de una tunanta. Eso ya se ve. Tiene aspecto de ser una muchacha campesina decente y, a juzgar por su acento, viene de muy lejos. Habla como aquel palafrenero que tuvimos y que era natural del norte. Era un hombre honrado y tengo entendido que por allá la gente es muy buena.

—Nunca vi en mi vida a una muchacha tan hermosa —observó el marido—. Parece un cromo. No se cansa uno de mirarla.

—Sí, pero más le valdría haber sido menos guapa y tener mejor conducta —sentenció la hostelera, que sin ningún género de dudas toda su vida había tenido mejor conducta que belleza—. Pero ya vuelve en sí. Trae un poco más de agua.

XXXVII

El viaje hacia la desesperación

Hetty estuvo demasiado enferma durante el resto de aquel día para contestar a las preguntas que le dirigían y ni siquiera pudo pensar con claridad sobre los males que la aguardaban. Únicamente comprendió que sus esperanzas se habían disipado y que, en vez de encontrar un refugio, había hallado un desierto donde no había un lugar para ella. La cama cómoda y los cuidados de la buena hostelera le proporcionaron algún alivio, semejante al que experimenta el hombre fatigado de andar que decide tenderse en la arena en vez de seguir camino bajo los ardientes rayos del sol.

Pero cuando el sueño y el descanso le hubieron devuelto la fuerza necesaria para recobrar la conciencia de su situación; cuando, a la mañana siguiente, la luz del amanecer la obligó a concentrarse de nuevo en buscar remedio a sus dolores, empezó a preguntarse qué podía hacer; luego recordó que ya no tenía dinero y se estremeció al imaginarse errante entre desconocidos; la experiencia de su viaje a Windsor no le abría perspectivas muy prometedoras. ¿Hacia dónde se encaminaría? ¿Qué haría? Aun en el caso de que pudiese conseguirlo, no le habría sido posible dedicarse a ningún trabajo. No le quedaba más remedio que mendigar. Recordó entonces a una mujer joven a quien un domingo encontraron apoyada en la pared de la iglesia de Hayslope, casi muerta de frío y de hambre, y con un niño en brazos. La recogieron y la llevaron a la parroquia. ¡La parroquia! El lector no podrá comprender el efecto de estas palabras en una mente como la de Hetty, que se había educado entre personas de sentimientos algo duros con respecto a la pobreza, que vivían entre los campos y se compadecían muy poco de la miseria y de los harapos, pues si bien en las ciudades se ven como una desgracia, en los pueblos se consideran el resultado de la pereza y del vicio. Y, precisamente, la pereza y el vicio proporcionaban cargas a la parroquia.

¡Cuánto deseaba estar de nuevo en su casa, querida y cuidada como siempre había estado! Las riñas de su tía por naderías le habrían parecido deliciosa música, y hasta las echaba de menos, porque no había entonces nada grave de que acusarse. ¿Podía ser ella la misma Hetty que solía ocuparse de hacer la manteca en la lechería, mientras por la ventana se asomaban las rosas? ¿Sería la misma fugitiva a quien sus amigos no querrían abrir la puerta, la misma que estaba tendida en aquel lecho extraño, sabiendo que no tenía dinero para pagar los cuidados que recibía y que debería ofrecer a aquellos desconocidos algo de la ropa que llevaba en el cesto? Entonces pensó en su guardapelo y en sus pendientes, y viendo que tenía cerca el bolso, lo cogió y extendió el contenido sobre el lecho. En sus estuchitos forrados de seda granate encontró el guardapelo y los pendientes; un dedal de plata con la inscripción «Acuérdate de mí»; un canuto de acero con un chelín dentro y una carterita de cuero rojo que se sujetaba por medio de una correa; ya no deseaba volver a usar aquellos hermosos pendientes, adornados con delicadas perlas y granates, que se puso con tanta alegría a la brillante luz del sol del 30 de julio. Su cabeza reposaba, lánguida, sobre la almohada, y la tristeza que se advertía en su frente y en sus ojos era demasiado intensa para que ella pensase en otros recuerdos. De pronto se llevó las manos a las orejas; los pendientes de oro que llevaba también valdrían algo. Sí, sin duda alguna podría obtener algún dinero a cambio de aquellos adornos. Los que Arthur le había regalado debieron de costar una gran suma. Los dueños de aquella casa habían sido muy buenos para ella y era probable que quisieran ayudarle a vender sus joyas.

Sin embargo, el dinero no duraría mucho tiempo. ¿Qué haría en cuanto lo hubiese gastado? ¿Adónde iría? La horrible idea de que sufriría necesidades y de que se vería obligada a mendigar, le hizo pensar por un momento en volver al lado de sus tíos para rogarles que la perdonaran y se compadeciesen de ella. Pero retrocedió ante aquella idea como si se tratase de un metal candente; jamás podría soportar aquella

vergüenza ante sus tíos, ante Mary Burge, los criados del cazadero, los habitantes de Broxton y todos cuantos la conocían. ¿Qué haría? Ante todo se alejaría de Windsor, viajaría como lo hizo la semana anterior y se aventuraría por los campos verdes y llanos, rodeados de altas montañas donde nadie pudiese verla o conocerla; y allí, cuando ya no le quedase otro remedio, tal vez tendría el valor suficiente para ahogarse en algún estanque como el que había a corta distancia de su casa. Sí, saldría lo antes posible de Windsor. No quería que la gente de la posada supiese quién era ella o la razón por la que había ido en busca del capitán Donnithorne. Y creyó que debía buscar alguna excusa que explicase sus preguntas sobre el paradero de Arthur.

Después de adoptar esta idea volvió a guardar sus joyas en el bolso, dispuesta a levantarse y a vestirse antes de que volviese la dueña de la casa. Tenía la mano apoyada en la cartera de cuero rojo cuando se le ocurrió que quizás podía haber algo dentro que hubiese olvidado, algo que pudiera vender, pues aunque ignoraba lo que podía hacer en su vida, deseaba tener los medios de prolongarla todo lo posible, y cuando se desea encontrar algo, no vacilamos en buscarlo en los lugares más extraños. No, allí no había más que algunos alfileres y agujas y unos pétalos secos de tulipán entre las hojas de papel en que anotara sus pequeñas cuentas. Pero en una de aquellas hojas había un nombre que, aun habiéndolo visto con frecuencia, nunca guardó para Hetty el valor que entonces adquirió de algo nuevo y recién descubierto. En el papel se leía: «Dinah Morris, Snowfield». Encima había un versículo escrito a lápiz por la mano de Dinah una tarde en que ambas estaban sentadas juntas y Hetty, por casualidad, dejó ante ella la cartera abierta. Hetty no leyó entonces el versículo, porque únicamente le llamó la atención el nombre. Por primera vez recordó sin indiferencia la afectuosa bondad que Dinah le había demostrado siempre, y también las palabras que ésta pronunció en su dormitorio, es decir, que Hetty debía de recordarla como una buena amiga en caso de necesidad. ¿Y si fuese en busca de Dinah para rogarle que la ayudase? Ella no pensaba del mismo modo que la gente en general; para Hetty era algo inexplicable, pero sabía que Dinah era siempre buena. No podía imaginarse a Dinah demostrándole su desaprobación o su desdén, y mucho menos hablándole con violencia o alegrándose de su desgracia y calificándola de castigo. Dinah no parecía pertenecer al mundo de la gente cuyas miradas de fuego tanto temía Hetty. Pero ni siquiera a ella quería pedirle misericordia ni hacerle una confesión; no pudo decidirse a ir en busca de Dinah; sólo pensó en ella como posible alternativa en caso de no tener bastante valor para morir.

La buena hostelera se quedó asombradísima al ver poco después a Hetty bajar la escalera cuidadosamente y, al parecer, tranquila y decidida. Hetty le dijo que se encontraba muy bien, que sólo era el agotamiento del viaje. Hacía días que había dejado su casa con objeto de averiguar el paradero de su hermano, el cual se había fugado, y como ella creía que habría sentado plaza de soldado, era fácil que el capitán Donnithorne lo supiese, ya que en otras ocasiones este último había demostrado su bondad con respecto a aquel mismo hermano. La historia no era muy ingeniosa y la buena mujer se quedó mirando con cierto recelo a Hetty mientras se la refería; pero aquella mañana la joven estaba tan resuelta y tenía un aspecto tan distinto del día anterior, que la hostelera no se atrevió a hacer ninguna observación que pudiese parecer indiscreta. Tan sólo la invitó a desayunar con ellos, momento en el que Hetty mostró sus pendientes y su guardapelo, rogando al posadero que le ayudase a venderlos. Dijo que su viaje le había costado mucho más dinero del que esperaba y que, como no tenía valor para volver con sus amigos, necesitaba vender aquello cuanto antes.

No era la primera vez que la hostelera veía aquellas joyas, porque el día anterior había examinado el contenido del bolso de Hetty; ella y su marido comentaron lo extraño que era que una campesina tuviese en su poder tales objetos, lo cual aumentó su convicción de que había sido miserablemente engañada por el oficial.

—Bueno —le dijo el posadero cuando Hetty hubo dejado en la mesa aquellos preciosos adornos—. Podríamos llevarlos a una joyería que está aquí cerca, pero me temo que no le querrán dar ni la cuarta parte de lo que valen. Además, supongo que no le gustaría desprenderse de ellos —añadió, mirándola con la mayor atención.

—¡Oh, no me importa! —objetó Hetty—, siempre y cuando obtenga el dinero necesario para volver…

—Además, si va a venderlos, podrían pensar que los ha robado, porque no es muy corriente que una joven como usted tenga esas joyas.

El rostro de Hetty se sonrojó de pura indignación.

—Pertenezco a una familia respetable y no soy una ladrona.

—Desde luego ya veo que no lo es —dijo la hostelera—, y tú no tienes derecho a hablar de esta manera —añadió volviéndose indignada a su marido—. Es evidente que todo eso se lo han regalado.

—Yo no quise decir semejante cosa —contestó el marido disculpándose—. No hice más que expresar lo

que podía pensar el joyero para pagar menos.

—Bueno —dijo la mujer—. Suponte que tú adelantas algún dinero sobre todo eso; si ella quiere recuperarlo cuando esté de vuelta en su casa, podrá hacerlo. Pero si no recibimos noticias dentro de dos meses, podremos disponer de esos objetos a nuestro gusto.

No quiero dar a entender que en esta proposición de la hostelera no hubiese cierto egoísmo y la esperanza de obtener la recompensa de sus buenos sentimientos con la definitiva posesión de los pendientes y del guardapelo. En realidad, la buena mujer tuvo una clara visión del efecto que harían los pendientes en sus propias orejas. El posadero examinó las joyas y frunció los labios con aire pensativo. Sin duda deseaba lo mejor para Hetty pero ¿cuántas personas animadas de buenas intenciones perderían la ocasión de conseguir un pequeño beneficio? A la dueña de la posada le afecta sinceramente que se marche uno de sus huéspedes, lo respeta en extremo y se alegra si alguien se muestra generoso con él; pero al mismo tiempo le entrega una cuenta en la que obtiene el mayor beneficio posible.

—¿Cuánto dinero necesita para volver a su casa, joven? —preguntó por fin el excelente posadero.

—Tres guineas —contestó Hetty recordando la suma que tenía al salir por falta de otro término de comparación y temiendo pedir demasiado.

—Bueno. No tengo inconveniente en prestarle tres guineas —dijo el posadero—. Y si me las devuelve podrá disponer de nuevo de sus joyas. Mientras tanto, le aseguro que el Green Man no echará a correr.

—¡Oh, sí! Le agradeceré mucho que me adelante esa suma —exclamó Hetty aliviada al pensar que no tendría que ir a casa del joyero para sufrir el examen o el interrogatorio de éste.

—Y si quiere recobrar las joyas, escriba cuanto antes —dijo la hostelera—, porque cuando hayan trascurrido dos meses dispondremos de ellas como nos convenga.

—Sí —contestó Hetty con indiferencia.

Marido y mujer quedaron igualmente contentos con este arreglo. El primero pensó que si Hetty no reclamaba las joyas podría llevarlas a Londres y venderlas muy bien; en cambio, la mujer se dijo que convencería al buen hombre para que se las regalase. Y, sin embargo, los dos creían hacer un bien a la pobre Hetty, a la hermosa joven de aspecto respetable que se hallaba en una situación penosa. No quisieron cobrarle nada por la comida ni por el alojamiento, y a las once Hetty se despidió de ellos con la misma resolución y tranquilidad de que diera muestras aquella mañana, y subió al coche que había de llevarla a treinta kilómetros de distancia por el mismo camino que siguiera al llegar.

Cuando abandonó el coche emprendió de nuevo la marcha a pie, a fin de aprovechar viajes baratos en los carros que encontraba, comiendo con la mayor economía, siempre adelante, pero sin un objetivo definido, aunque extrañamente seguía el mismo camino de la ida pero a la inversa, pese a que estaba resuelta a no regresar a casa. Tal vez actuaba así por su atracción hacia los campos de Warwickshire, cuyos altos setos le ofrecerían un escondrijo seguro aun en invierno, cuando los árboles estaban desprovistos de hojas. Andaba más despacio que a la ida, y con frecuencia descansaba largas horas debajo de los árboles; sus hermosos e inexpresivos ojos miraban sin ver; se imaginaba en la orilla de un pantano escondido como aquel en que estuvo a punto de arrojarse y se preguntaba si los que se ahogaban sufrían mucho y si después de la muerte habría algo peor de lo que temía en la vida. Las doctrinas religiosas nunca causaron mucha impresión en Hetty; era una de aquellas personas que han sido bautizadas, han aprendido el catecismo, han sido confirmadas y han ido a la iglesia los domingos, y que, sin embargo, jamás se han apropiado de un sentimiento o de una idea cristianos, de modo que el lector no comprendería las ideas de Hetty durante aquellos días horribles si se imaginase que estaban influidas por las esperanzas o por los temores religiosos.

Decidió ir de nuevo a Stratford-on-Avon, adonde la primera vez había llegado por error, pues recordaba un estanque oculto entre los campos. Sin embargo, seguía economizando el dinero, continuaba llevando el cesto y la vida era tan intensa en ella, que la muerte le parecía muy lejana. Deseaba comer y descansar, y buscaba ambas cosas desesperadamente justo en el momento en que creía estar en la orilla desde la cual podría dar un salto hacia la muerte. Habían pasado ya cinco días desde que salió de Windsor, cinco días en que había ido de un lado para otro, evitando siempre cualquier conversación y toda mirada interrogadora y esforzándose en recobrar su orgullosa independencia cuantas veces se veía sometida a alguna observación.

Por las noches buscaba un alojamiento decente, se vestía con cuidado por las mañanas y emprendía, animosa, su camino, o buscaba un cobijo en caso de lluvia, como si todavía le importase conservar la vida. Y, sin embargo, en sus momentos de mayor dolor, la tristeza de su rostro era distinta de la que pudo contemplar en el espejo empañado de su habitación. En sus ojos había aparecido una mirada dura y hasta feroz, aunque sus pestañas eran tan largas como siempre y aún conservaban su oscura brillantez. Sus mejillas nunca se llenaban de hoyuelos, pues raras veces sonreía. Su rostro era lozano, infantil y siempre hermoso, pero de él habían desaparecido el amor y la confianza, y así su belleza era triste y en sus labios

apasionados no se advertía la menor pasión.

Por fin se vio entre los campos con que había estado soñando, y en un largo y estrecho sendero que conducía a un bosque. ¡Oh! ¡Si hubiese allí un estanque! Estaría más oculto que si se hallase entre los campos. Pero no, aquello no era un bosque sino un grupo de matorrales que, en otro tiempo, fue depósito de cantos rodados, y los montículos y hondonadas estaban cubiertos de maleza y de arbustos. Los recorrió de un lado a otro, esperando siempre encontrar un depósito de agua en una hondonada, hasta que, finalmente, se agotó y tuvo que sentarse a descansar.

La tarde estaba ya avanzada y el cielo plomizo se oscurecía como si el sol estuviese a punto de ocultarse. Poco después Hetty se puso en pie; pronto reinaría la oscuridad y más valía buscar abrigo para la noche, aunque se prometió dedicar el día siguiente al hallazgo del estanque. Se había perdido entre los campos y tanto le importaba seguir una dirección como otra; anduvo largo rato sin encontrar ningún pueblo ni casa, pero en el extremo de un prado observó que se interrumpía la línea de los setos y que la tierra se hundía y dos árboles se inclinaban sobre aquella abertura. El corazón de Hetty se aceleró al imaginarse que allí estaba el estanque que andaba buscando. Se acercó a aquel lugar pisando la espesa hierba; estaba pálida y temblorosa; era como si no lo hubiera estado buscando, como si lo hubiera encontrado a pesar de sí misma.

Allí estaba, y a la luz del crepúsculo tenía un color negruzco. Todo estaba inmóvil y no se oía cosa alguna. Dejó el cesto en el suelo y luego se sentó, temblando, sobre la hierba. El estanque tenía la profundidad propia del invierno, de modo que en cuanto se secase en verano, como ocurría a los estanques de Hayslope, nadie podría ya identificar su cuerpo. Pero estaba el cesto y era necesario ocultarlo o arrojarlo al agua lleno de piedras. Empezó a buscarlas y pronto recogió cinco o seis, que dejó al lado del cesto. Hecho esto se sentó; no había ninguna prisa; disponía de toda la noche para ahogarse. Apoyó el codo en el cesto; estaba cansada y hambrienta. En el cesto llevaba tres bollos que había comprado en el mismo lugar donde había comido. Los sacó y se los comió con apetito, y luego volvió a quedarse sentada y mirando al estanque. La satisfacción que sintió al calmar el hambre y aquella mirada fija y ensoñadora, le produjeron un extraño torpor. Apoyó la cabeza en las rodillas y se quedó dormida.

Al despertar vio que era de noche y estaba helada. Aquella oscuridad le dio miedo y sintió temor de la larga noche que la esperaba. ¡Si pudiera echarse al agua! Pero no; todavía no. Empezó a andar para coger calor, como si éste pudiera darle mayor decisión. El hogar resplandeciente, el calor y las voces de su casa, la seguridad y la paz que en ella se gozaba, los campos familiares, las personas conocidas, los domingos y fiestas, con sus sencillas alegrías de ponerse un vestido nuevo y de ir a divertirse…, esas dulces imágenes de su vida resurgieron ante Hetty y extendió sus brazos hacia ellas como a través de un profundo abismo. Al pensar en Arthur apretó los dientes y lo maldijo sin saber el alcance que podía tener su maldición. Deseó que él también conociese la desolación, el frío y la vida de vergüenza que no se atrevía a dar término apelando a la muerte.

El horror de aquel frío, de la oscuridad y de la soledad lejos de las miradas de la gente, crecía por momentos; le parecía estar muerta y comprendió que, en realidad, había perdido la vida y deseaba volver a ella. Pero no; aún vivía, todavía tenía que dar aquel horrible salto. Sintió una extraña y contradictoria mezcla de alegría y de tristeza. Tristeza por no atreverse a afrontar la muerte, y alegría por seguir viviendo, por ser todavía capaz de ver la luz, de sentir el calor.

Empezó a andar de un lado a otro para vencer el frío que sentía y, al mismo tiempo, distinguió algunas de las sombras que la rodeaban a medida que sus ojos se acostumbraban más a la noche; divisó la oscura línea de los matorrales, el rápido movimiento de algún animal, tal vez una rata campestre, que corría por entre la hierba. Ya no creía que la oscuridad fuese un obstáculo, y se sintió capaz de atravesar el campo y llegar al portillo. Una vez en el campo de al lado creyó recordar que, cerca de un aprisco, había un cobijo de aliagas. Si pudiera llegar hasta allá, no tendría tanto frío. E incluso podría pasar la noche en aquel abrigo, pues recordaba que Alick lo hacía en la época de pastoreo. El recuerdo de aquella cabaña le devolvió la alegría y la esperanza.

Tomó el cesto y atravesó el campo, pero trascurrió un buen rato antes de que encontrase el cobijo. El ejercicio y el deseo de hallarlo fueron, para ella, un motivo que contribuyó a disminuir el horror de la oscuridad y de la soledad. En el campo inmediato había algunas ovejas, y las asustó al dejar el cesto en el suelo para atravesar el portillo; el ruido de sus movimientos la consoló, le dio la certeza de que no se había equivocado. Ese era el campo del cobijo, pues recordaba haber visto en él aquellas ovejas.

Siguió pues el camino, llegó al portón del otro lado y, al encontrar el aprisco, no tardó en descubrir la cabaña, según le demostró el contacto punzante de las aliagas que, en ese momento, le pareció delicioso. Había encontrado ya un abrigo y, dando la vuelta en torno a él, llegó a la puerta y la abrió. Era un lugar reducido y maloliente pero cálido y, además, tenía bastante paja en el suelo. Hetty se dejó caer, sintiendo

un alivio extraordinario. Empezó a llorar, cosa que no había hecho desde que salió de Windsor, y con lágrimas y sollozos expresó la histérica alegría de vivir aún, de encontrarse todavía en la tierra y con las ovejas a corta distancia. La sola sensación de sus propios miembros le resultaba deliciosa. Se levantó las mangas y se besó los brazos con apasionado amor a la vida.

Pronto el calor y el cansancio la adormecieron en medio del llanto, y soñó que aún estaba en la orilla del estanque, creyendo que ya había saltado al agua; se despertó sobresaltada y se preguntó dónde estaba. Finalmente la venció el sueño y su cabeza, protegida por el gorro, halló una almohada en la pared, y así, aquella alma desgraciada, indecisa entre dos terrores iguales, encontró el único alivio que aún le quedaba, es decir, la inconsciencia.

Pero ¡ay!, este alivio pareció terminar apenas hubo empezado. Hetty soñó que estaba en el cobijo y que su tía empuñaba una vela encendida; tembló bajo su mirada y abrió los ojos. No vio ninguna vela, pero sí la luz de la mañana que atravesaba la puerta abierta. Y también la miraba un hombre desconocido de cierta edad.

—¿Qué hace aquí, joven? —preguntó con rudeza.

Ante ese temor real y esa vergüenza, tembló aún más que en el sueño bajo la mirada de su tía.

Comprendió que era como una pordiosera, por haber sido sorprendida en aquel lugar. Pero a pesar del temblor, experimentó tal deseo de explicar su presencia que halló enseguida las palabras apropiadas.

—Me he extraviado —dijo—. Me dirijo hacia el norte y ayer tarde abandoné el camino para atravesar los campos, y me sorprendió la noche. ¿Quiere indicarme el camino que me conduzca al pueblo más inmediato?

Se puso en pie mientras hablaba, se llevó las manos al gorro para ajustárselo y luego tomó el cesto.

El hombre le dirigió una mirada bovina sin decir palabra. Unos segundos después se volvió y se dirigió a la puerta; al llegar allí ladeó la cabeza y dijo:

—Sí, puedo mostrarle el camino para ir a Norton. Pero ¿por qué salió de la carretera? —añadió en tono de reproche—. Podía haberle ocurrido una desgracia.

—Sí —replicó Hetty—; no volveré a hacerlo. Le prometo seguir el camino si es tan amable para indicarme por dónde puedo llegar a él.

—Mejor sería que consultara los postes indicadores o preguntase a la gente —replicó aquel hombre con tono más brusco aún—. Cualquiera que la viese la tomaría por una bruja.

Hetty se asustó al oír aquellas palabras y más aún cuando su interlocutor le dijo que se marchase pronto. Mientras lo seguía y salía del cobijo, pensó en darle seis peniques a cambio de su indicación y para que no la creyese una bruja. Y cuando él se detuvo para señalarle la dirección del camino, Hetty echó manó al bolsillo para sacar los seis peniques. Su interlocutor se volvía ya sin despedirse, pero ella le ofreció la moneda, diciendo:

—Muchas gracias. ¿Quiere aceptar esto por su molestia?

Aquel hombre contempló la moneda y replicó:

—No necesito su dinero para nada. Mejor tenga cuidado de que no se lo roben, cosa que ocurrirá si anda vagando por los campos como una loca.

Dicho esto se alejó y Hetty emprendió el camino. Había llegado el nuevo día y se veía obligada a seguir andando. Ya no había que pensar en ahogarse, pues no tenía fuerzas para hacerlo, por lo menos mientras le quedase dinero para comprar comida y fuerza para seguir andando. Pero el incidente de aquella mañana había aumentado sus temores para cuando se le terminara el dinero definitivamente. Entonces tendría que vender el cesto y la ropa, y empezaría a tener aspecto de mendiga o de bruja. Había desaparecido ya de ella la apasionada alegría de vivir que había sentido por la noche tras evitar la muerte en el frío estanque. A la luz de la mañana, tras la impresión de la dura mirada del hombre, la vida era tan terrible como la misma muerte, o incluso peor; un miedo al que se sentía encadenada y del que habría querido retroceder como del estanque negro, pero no había refugio en el que esconderse.

Sacó él dinero del bolso y lo contó. Aún le quedaban veintidós chelines, que le podían durar muchos días, por lo menos hasta llegar a Stonyshire, o sea a muy poca distancia de Dinah. Desde que había desistido de arrojarse al estanque, la tenía más presente. Si se hubiera tratado de ir solamente al encuentro de Dinah, y de que nadie más que ésta se enterara, tal vez Hetty se habría resuelto a hacerlo. La voz suave y los ojos compasivos de Dinah la habrían atraído a su lado. Pero luego los demás se enterarían, y esta vergüenza le daba tanto miedo como la misma muerte.

Debía seguir andando sin parar, en espera de que un acceso de desesperación le diese el valor que le faltaba. Tal vez la muerte acudiría a su encuentro, pues cada día se sentía más fatigada. Y, sin embargo, porque así es el extraño carácter de nuestras almas, que por medio de un deseo agradable nos conducen al

fin que tememos, cuando Hetty salió de Norton preguntó cuál era el camino más directo para ir hacia el norte y hacia Stonshire, y no dejó de seguirlo durante todo el día.

¡Pobre y errante Hetty, de cara infantil, a la que se asomaba su triste alma desesperada, y cuyo pequeño corazón y estrecha mente no le dejaban sitio para nada más que para sus propios dolores, de modo que podía saborearlos con más intensa amargura! Mi corazón sangra por ella al verla proseguir viaje con sus cansados pies o sentada en un carro, en tanto que mira sin ver el camino que tiene delante, importándole muy poco adonde ha de conducirla hasta que se presenta el hambre y le hace desear la proximidad de un pueblo.

¿Y cuál será el fin? ¿Cuál el término de su viaje sin objetivo determinado, lejos del amor, y pensando en los seres humanos sólo armada de un sentimiento de orgullo, agarrándose a la vida como lo hace un pobre animal perseguido y herido?

Dios nos libre a ti y a mí, lector, de ser los protagonistas de una tragedia como ésa.

XXXVIII

PESQUISAS

Transcurrieron con la tranquilidad acostumbrada para la familia de Hall Farm los primeros diez días siguientes a la partida de Hetty, y Adam, por su parte, pasó aquel tiempo entregado a su trabajo habitual. Todos esperaban que Hetty estuviese ausente una semana o diez días, por lo menos, y quizás un poco más si Dinah se decidía a regresar con ella, pues era muy posible que algo impidiese a ésta salir inmediatamente de Snowfield. Pero en cuanto hubieron trascurrido quince días, todos empezaron a sentir cierta sorpresa de que Hetty no estuviese ya de vuelta; sin duda la estancia con Dinah le había resultado mucho más agradable de lo que era de suponer. Adam estaba ya impaciente por verla y resolvió que si no llegaba al día siguiente, que era sábado, él saldría el domingo por la mañana en su busca. Ese día no había coche, pero saliendo antes de amanecer y quizás aprovechando algún carro que encontrase por el camino, llegaría bastante temprano a Snowfield para traerse consigo a Hetty al día siguiente, así como a Dinah si ésta quería acompañarles. Ya era tiempo de que Hetty volviese a su casa, y así, Adam decidió perder el lunes en recogerla.

Su proyecto recibió la aprobación de los habitantes de la granja cuando les visitó el sábado por la tarde. La señora le encargó muy especialmente no volver sin Hetty, pues ya había estado ausente demasiado tiempo, teniendo en cuenta las cosas que había de preparar para mediados de marzo, aparte de que una semana era tiempo más que sobrado para quien quisiera reponer su salud. En cuanto a Dinah, la señora Poyser tenía poca esperanza de que quisiera ir a vivir con ella, a no ser que le hiciesen creer que los habitantes de Hayslope eran el doble de pobres y miserables que los de Snowfield.

—Además —terminó diciendo la señora Poyser—, podría decirle que solamente le queda una tía y que ésta tiene muy mala salud. También puede ocurrir que para el próximo San Miguel nos hallemos a treinta kilómetros de distancia de aquí y que nos muramos entre extraños, dejando a nuestros hijos abandonados y huérfanos de padre y madre.

—No es para tanto —observó el señor Poyser, que nunca tenía tan trágicas ideas—. Tú estás cada día mejor y hasta engordas. Sin embargo, me gustaría mucho que viniese Dinah, porque te ayudaría con los niños. Ellos la quieren mucho.

Así pues, el domingo, al apuntar el día, Adam emprendió la marcha. Seth le acompañó durante un par de kilómetros, pues al pensar en Snowfield y en la posibilidad de que Dinah volviese se sentía inquieto, y el simple hecho de acompañar a Adam le proporcionaba cierta tranquilidad. Era la última mañana de febrero y el cielo estaba gris y las nubes muy bajas, y junto al camino y en los negros matorrales se veían aún los cristales de la escarcha. Oyeron el rumor del regato que bajaba por la montaña y el débil piar de los primeros pájaros. Andaban en silencio, aunque experimentando una sensación muy agradable de compañerismo.

—¡Adiós, muchacho! —exclamó Adam poniendo la mano en el hombro de Seth y mirándole con afecto antes de separarse—. ¡Ojalá pudieras acompañarme todo el camino y ser tan feliz como yo!

—Estoy contento, Adam, muy contento —replicó Seth con tono alegre—. Al fin y al cabo, me quedaré soltero toda la vida y podré jugar con tus hijos.

Se separaron y Seth emprendió el camino de su casa, repitiendo mentalmente uno de sus himnos favoritos.

Oscura y triste es la mañana

cuando tú no la acompañas;
el día del regreso carece de alegría
hasta que yo veo los rayos de tu misericordia,
hasta que tu luz interior llega
a alegrar mis ojos y a calentar mi corazón.
Visita, pues, esta alma mía;
atraviesa la penumbra del pecado y del dolor;
llénname del resplandor divino,
dispersa mi incredulidad,
muéstrate más cada vez
y brilla para iluminar el día.

Adam iba mucho más deprisa, y cualquiera que hubiese transitado por el camino de Oakbourne aquella mañana a la salida del sol, habría recibido una impresión muy agradable al ver a aquel muchacho alto y fornido que andaba con paso vivo y con la marcialidad propia de un soldado mientras dirigía sus ojos agudos y alegres hacia las azules montañas que empezaban a mostrarse a la luz del sol. Pocas veces en la vida de Adam estuvo su rostro tan libre de inquietud como aquella mañana; y esta serenidad, como ocurre casi siempre en las mentes prácticas como la suya, le hacía más atento a los objetos que le rodeaban y le disponía mejor a hacer observaciones aplicables a sus planes favoritos y a sus ingeniosas ideas. Su felicidad, el conocimiento de que sus pasos lo aproximaban cada vez más a Hetty, que muy pronto sería suya, era para sus pensamientos lo que el dulce aire de la mañana para sus sensaciones, y le daba un bienestar que hacía agradabilísima la actividad. De vez en cuando sus pensamientos se detenían sólo en Hetty, alejando toda otra imagen que no se refiriese a ella; y, al mismo tiempo, sentía un agradecimiento intenso por haber sido favorecido por aquella felicidad, maravillándose de que la vida pudiese resultar tan dulce. Nuestro amigo Adam tenía una mente devota, aunque quizás mostraba alguna impaciencia con respecto a las palabras de devoción; su ternura estaba muy cerca de su reverencia, de modo que en cuanto se agitaba una, lo mismo le ocurría a la otra. Pero después de recrearse en estas ideas, las de orden práctico aparecían con redoblado vigor, y aquella mañana no hacía más que pensar en el modo de arreglar los caminos; y se imaginaba los beneficios que podrían resultar para la comarca de los esfuerzos de un solo caballero que quisiera dedicarse a mejorar las vías de comunicación de su distrito.

Le pareció muy corto el trayecto de quince kilómetros hasta Oakbourne, y desayunó en esa linda población contigua a las montañas. Más allá, el paisaje era menos risueño. Ya no se divisaban bosques ni casas rodeadas de árboles, ni tampoco setos frondosos, sino unas paredes de piedra gris que dividían los pobres pastos y, a veces, algunas casas de piedra gris emergiendo de una tierra más gris todavía.

«Está claro que en esta tierra reina el hambre —se dijo Adam—. Preferiría ir hacia el sur donde, según dicen, la tierra es tan llana como una mesa; sin embargo Dinah prefiere vivir en un país donde puede consolar a la gente y, siendo así, hace bien en habitar en esta región. No hay duda de que aquí deben de pensar que les ha caído del cielo, como los ángeles en el desierto, para dar ánimos a los que no tienen nada que comer».

Al divisar Snowfield, se dijo que aquella población estaba en armonía con la comarca que la rodeaba, a pesar de que la corriente que atravesaba el valle, donde estaba instalado el molino, hacía verdecer muy agradablemente los campos. La población tenía un aspecto triste y gris y se hallaba en la ladera de una empinada montaña, pero Adam no se dirigió a ella, porque Seth le había dicho dónde podría encontrar a Dinah. Se trataba de una casita de tejado de paja algo separada de la población y a poca distancia del molino, una edificación vieja situada junto al camino y que tenía delante un campo de patatas. Allí Dinah vivía con un matrimonio anciano, y si ella y Hetty estuviesen fuera en aquel momento, Adam podría preguntarles adonde habían ido o a qué hora estarían de regreso. Era posible que Dinah hubiese salido a predicar y también que dejara en casa a Hetty; Adam así esperaba, y en cuanto reconoció la casita brilló en su rostro una involuntaria sonrisa, propia del que espera una alegría inmediata.

Apresuró el paso a lo largo del estrecho sendero y llamó a la puerta. La abrió una mujer ya anciana y muy limpia, que meneaba la cabeza con un temblor convulsivo.

—¿Está en casa Dinah Morris?

—No, no está —contestó la vieja mirando al desconocido con tanta extrañeza que hablaba con gran lentitud—. ¿Quiere hacer el favor de entrar? —añadió retirándose para dejarle paso—. Supongo que será el hermano del joven que vino hace poco, ¿no es así?

—Eso es —contestó Adam entrando—. Era Seth Bede y yo soy Adam. Me encargó presentarles sus

respetos a usted y a su esposo.

—Hágame el favor de devolvérselos. Es un joven muy agradable y usted se parece mucho a él, aunque es más moreno. Siéntese en ese sillón. Mi marido aún no ha vuelto de la iglesia.

Adam se sentó pacientemente, pues no quería agobiar a la pobre mujer con preguntas, pero miraba con atención hacia la escalera de caracol que vio en un rincón, creyendo que Hetty habría oído su voz y se apresuraría a bajar.

—¿De modo que ha venido a ver a Dinah Morris? —dijo la vieja poniéndose en pie—. ¿No sabe que está ausente?

—No —contestó Adam—, aunque ya me lo figuraba, al ser domingo. Y en cuanto a la otra joven…, ¿está en casa o ha salido con Dinah?

La anciana miró a Adam muy extrañada.

—¿Que si ha salido con ella? —preguntó—. Dinah ha ido a Leeds, una gran ciudad de la que habrá oído hablar, donde hay muchos hijos de Dios. Se marchó quince días antes del viernes pasado, porque le enviaron el dinero necesario para hacer el viaje. Mire, aquí está su habitación —añadió abriendo la puerta y sin fijarse en el efecto que sus palabras hacían en Adam.

Este se levantó y la siguió para dirigir una mirada escrutadora a la pequeña estancia provista de una cama estrecha, del retrato de Wesley colgado de la pared y de algunos libros encima de la gran Biblia. Abrigaba la injustificada esperanza de que Hetty pudiera estar allí, pero al ver que la estancia se hallaba vacía se quedó un momento sin hablar, presa de un temor indefinido e intenso de que hubiese podido ocurrirle algo a la joven durante el viaje. Pero la vieja hablaba y comprendía con tanta lentitud que aún cabía en lo posible que Hetty estuviese en Snowfield.

—Es una lástima que no lo supiera —dijo—. ¿Ha venido de su país expresamente para verla?

—Pero ¿dónde está Hetty? ¡Hetty Sorrel! —preguntó Adam de pronto.

—No conozco a nadie con ese nombre —replicó la anciana extrañada—. ¿Le han dicho que estaba en Snowfield esa persona?

—¿No vino aquí una joven, muy joven y guapa…, hace ya más de quince días para ver a Dinah Morris?

—No. No he visto a ninguna joven.

—Piénselo bien. ¿Está segura? ¿Una muchacha de dieciocho años, con los ojos negros y el cabello rizado del mismo color, que vestía una capa roja y llevaba un cesto en la mano? Si la ha visto, no es posible que la haya olvidado.

—No, quince días antes del viernes pasado, o sea cuando se marchó Dinah, no vi a ninguna persona y desde entonces no ha venido nadie a preguntar por ella, a excepción de usted, porque todos los de aquí saben ya que se ha marchado. ¡Dios mío! Pero ¿qué ocurre?

La anciana pudo ver la mirada de espanto que asomó a los ojos de Adam, pero éste no se quedó confundido ni paralizado, sino que, por el contrario, empezó a pensar rápidamente dónde podría conseguir noticias de Hetty.

—Sí. Una joven salió de nuestro pueblo para ver a Dinah. Marchó ya hace más de quince días. Yo he venido con objeto de recogerla y temo que le haya ocurrido algo. No puedo entretenerme. Buenos días.

Salió de la casita y la anciana fue hasta la puerta meneando la cabeza, mientras él se dirigía casi corriendo a la población, con objeto de preguntar en el lugar donde se detenía el coche de Oakbourne.

No, nadie había visto por allá a una joven de las señas de Hetty. Preguntó si el coche había tenido algún accidente unos quince días atrás, y le contestaron negativamente; además, aquel día no salía ningún vehículo que pudiese llevarlo a Oakbourne. En vista de ello decidió marcharse a pie, pues no podía permanecer allí en la inacción. Mas el posadero, observando que Adam estaba muy inquieto e interesándose por aquel asunto, con el entusiasmo propio de un hombre que pasa la mayor parte del tiempo con las manos en los bolsillos contemplando una calle obstinadamente monótona, le ofreció llevarle aquella misma tarde a Oakbourne en su coche, y como aún no eran las cinco de la tarde, Adam tenía tiempo más que sobrado para comer y llegar a Oakbourne antes de las diez de la noche. El posadero declaró que él también deseaba ir allá y que podría hacerlo aquella misma tarde, de modo que así dispondría del lunes entero. Una vez Adam hubo intentado, en vano, comer algo, se guardó en el bolsillo algunas cosas que no pudo tragar y, después de beber un vaso de cerveza, se manifestó dispuesto a emprender el viaje. Al pasar por delante de la casita, se le ocurrió preguntar a la vieja dónde podría encontrar a Dinah en Leeds, pues si los habitantes de Hall Farm vivían un gran disgusto, y el joven era pesimista al respecto, los Poyser querrían saber las señas de Dinah para hacerla llamar. Pero ésta no había dejado ninguna dirección, y la vieja, cuya memoria para los nombres era muy mala, no pudo recordar el de la mejor amiga de Dinah entre la gente de Leeds.

Durante el largo viaje en el coche del posadero, Adam tuvo tiempo para hacer toda clase de conjeturas,

tan pronto pesimistas como optimistas. En un primer momento, después de descubrir que Hetty no había estado en Snowfield, atravesó su mente, produciéndole una impresión dolorosa la idea de que ella había podido ir en busca de Arthur. Pero luego procuró alejar de sí aquella sospecha desagradable. Sin duda había ocurrido algún accidente. Por una extraña casualidad, Hetty debió de subir en Oakbourne a otro coche con diferente destino; tal vez luego se puso enferma y no quiso alarmar a su familia, comunicándole la noticia. Pero estas vagas improbabilidades pronto quedaron desplazadas por el temor y por horribles ideas. Hetty debió de engañarse a sí misma al pensar que podría amarle y casarse con él, pues en realidad sólo amaba a Arthur; y ahora, desesperada al ver tan próxima la fecha de la boda, resolvió huir y reunirse con aquél. Despertaron de nuevo sus celos y su indignación y hasta imaginó que Arthur había obrado con falsedad, escribiendo a Hetty y tentándola para que fuese a reunirse con él, decidido finalmente a que no perteneciese a otro hombre. Quizás tenía él la culpa de todo lo ocurrido y había dado instrucciones a la joven para que le siguiese hasta Irlanda, pues Adam averiguó en el cazadero que hacía ya tres semanas que estaba allí. Recordó las miradas tristes de Hetty desde su compromiso, exagerando la importancia de estas observaciones de un modo penoso. Sin duda él había sido demasiado confiado. La pobrecilla quizás ignoraba sus propios sentimientos y creyó que podría olvidar a Arthur, y momentáneamente se sintió atraída por el hombre que le ofrecía su amor fiel y protector. A pesar de todo no la censuraba, porque sin duda ella jamás deseó causarle aquel dolor. La culpa la tenía aquel hombre que había jugado con sus sentimientos de un modo tan egoísta y que después quizás la había llamado a su lado.

En Oakbourne el palafrenero del Royal Oak recordaba a una joven de las señas que le dio Adam; había tomado el coche de Treddleston hacía ya más de quince días. Dijo que no podía menos de recordar a aquella hermosa joven y que estaba seguro que no tomó el coche de Buxton, que se dirigía hacia Snowfield, pero que la perdió de vista mientras estaba ocupado con los caballos y no volvió a divisarla. Entonces Adam se dirigió a la casa de la que partía el coche de Stoniton, porque éste era un lugar adonde Hetty debía de dirigirse primero, cualquiera que fuese su destino, ya que no se aventuraría a ir más que por las carreteras principales. Allí también la habían visto y recordaban que se sentó en la delantera junto al cochero, pero fue imposible encontrar a éste, pues hacía ya tres o cuatro días que lo habían sustituido en su empleo. Quizás lo hallasen en Stoniton, preguntando en la posada donde el coche se había detenido. Así el inquieto y dolorido Adam tuvo necesidad de esperar a la mañana siguiente; mejor dicho, hasta las once, hora en que salía el coche.

En Stoniton hubo otra demora, porque el viejo cochero que llevó a Hetty había salido de la población y no volvería hasta la noche. Al regresar recordó muy bien a Hetty y también la broma que le dirigió y que repitió varias veces a Adam; había observado que a la joven debía de ocurrirle algo raro, pues sus palabras no la hicieron ni siquiera sonreír. Añadió que la había perdido de vista en cuanto bajó del coche. Parte de la siguiente mañana fue empleada en investigaciones en todas las casas de la ciudad desde las cuales partía algún vehículo, pero todo fue en vano, porque ya sabemos que Hetty salió a pie de Stoniton en las primeras horas de la mañana. Luego Adam recorrió todas las barreras de peaje de las carreteras, con la vaga esperanza de que alguien la recordase, pero no pudo seguir sus huellas más allá, de modo que no tuvo más remedio que regresar a casa para trasmitir aquellas malas noticias a los habitantes de Hall Farm. En cuanto a lo que haría luego, sólo pudo tomar dos resoluciones en la confusión de sus ideas: nada diría de la conducta de Arthur Donnithorne con respecto a Hetty hasta que fuese absolutamente necesario, porque aún cabía la posibilidad de que la joven volviese, y, en tal caso, el haber revelado aquel secreto constituiría una vergüenza para ella. También decidió que en cuanto llegara a su casa, después de preparar lo necesario para ausentarse de nuevo, emprendería el viaje a Irlanda, y si en el camino no encontraba huellas de Hetty, buscaría a Arthur Donnithorne para averiguar qué sabía él sobre los movimientos de la joven. Varias veces se le ocurrió la idea de consultar al señor Irwine, pero eso sería inútil del todo, a no ser que le revelase lo ocurrido, sin callar nada, traicionando el secreto. Parece raro que Adam, en su incesante preocupación por Hetty, nunca pensase que la joven se había dirigido a Windsor ignorando que Arthur ya no estaba allí. Quizás no pudiera concebir que Hetty fuese en busca del caballero sin ser llamada. No podía imaginar ninguna causa que la obligase a dar semejante paso, en vista de la carta que le había escrito Arthur en el mes de agosto. En su mente no había más que una alternativa: o bien Arthur le había escrito de nuevo para tentarla, o, simplemente, ella huyó de la inminente boda al darse cuenta de que no podría amarle bastante y temiendo, por otra parte, la indignación de sus parientes en cuanto se retractase.

Decidido a ir en busca de Arthur, le torturaba la idea de haber perdido dos días en vano; y, sin embargo, puesto que no quería decir a los Poyser las sospechas que tenía sobre Hetty, ni su intención de seguirla, era conveniente demostrarles que había hecho cuanto humanamente era posible para averiguar su paradero.

Después de las doce de la noche del martes, Adam llegó a Treddleston y, deseando no molestar a su

madre ni a Seth, y evitar, al mismo tiempo, sus preguntas a aquellas horas, fue a acostarse sin desnudarse a el Waggin Overthrow, donde se sumió en profundo sueño a causa del cansancio, aunque no durmió más de cuatro horas, pues antes de las cinco salió para continuar su viaje de regreso aprovechando la primera luz de la mañana. Siempre llevaba en el bolsillo la llave de su taller, a fin de poder entrar a cualquier hora, y deseaba hacerlo entonces sin despertar a Lisbeth, pues, ante todo, quería hablar con Seth para rogarle que se lo dijera a su madre cuando fuese necesario. Sin hacer ruido entró en el patio e hizo girar con suavidad la llave en la cerradura; pero, como ya esperaba, Gyp, que estaba en el taller, dio un ladrido. Se calló al ver el gesto de Adam que le imponía silencio; y en su muda alegría, y desprovisto de rabo como estaba, tuvo que contentarse con frotar su cuerpo contra las piernas de su amo.

Adam estaba demasiado disgustado para fijarse en el afecto del perro. Se dejó caer en el banco y se quedó mirando a su alrededor las herramientas y las faenas empezadas, preguntándose si en adelante volvería a disfrutar con ellas. Mientras tanto Gyp, comprendiendo vagamente que a su amo le ocurría algo desagradable, apoyó la cabeza en su rodilla y contrajo las cejas para mirarle. Como desde el domingo por la tarde Adam había estado constantemente entre gente desconocida y en lugares que le eran extraños, sin recordar los detalles de su vida diaria, al verse de pronto otra vez en su casa y rodeado por los objetos familiares que, al parecer, habían perdido todo su encanto, la horrible realidad de su pena lo agobió con nuevo peso. Ante él vio una cómoda sin terminar que se había dedicado a construir en los momentos de ocio para Hetty.

Seth no oyó la entrada de su hermano, pero en cambio se despertó a causa del ladrido de Gyp, de modo que Adam le oyó moverse en la habitación superior mientras se vestía. Seth pensó en su hermano enseguida. Se dijo que volvería aquel día; los asuntos le reclamarían al siguiente, aunque le resultaba agradable pensar que había hecho un viaje mucho más largo de lo previsto. ¿Vendría también Dinah? Seth se dijo que ésta sería la mayor felicidad que podría esperar, aunque ya no tenía esperanza de que llegase a quererle lo bastante para casarse con él; pero, como se decía con frecuencia, más valía ser amigo y hermano de Dinah que marido de otra mujer cualquiera. Si por lo menos pudiese estar siempre a su lado en vez de vivir tan lejos de ella…

Bajó la escalera y abrió la puerta interior que desde la casa conducía al taller para dejar salir a Gyp, pero se quedó inmóvil, en el umbral de la puerta, sobresaltado al ver a Adam sentado en el banco, pálido, sin muestras de haberse lavado, con los ojos hundidos y casi con el aspecto que tienen los borrachos por la mañana. Seth no tardó en comprender la causa. Aquello no se debía a la embriaguez, sino a una gran calamidad. Adam levantó los ojos y se quedó mirándole sin hablar y Seth se aproximó al banco temblando de tal manera que apenas pudo pronunciar una palabra.

—¡Dios tenga piedad de nosotros, Adam! —dijo por fin en voz baja y sentándose al lado de su hermano.

Adam no era capaz de contestar. Aquel hombre fuerte, acostumbrado a suprimir todo síntoma de dolor, se sintió como un niño al notar la aproximación de una persona que le demostraba simpatía, y arrojándose al cuello de Seth se echó a llorar.

Seth estaba ya preparado para lo peor, porque no recordaba haber visto nunca llorar a su hermano.

—¿Ha muerto, Adam? —preguntó en voz baja mientras su hermano levantaba la cabeza y trataba de dominarse.

—No, hermano. Pero ha desaparecido. Ha huido de nosotros. No ha estado en Snowfield. Dinah se ausentó de allí hace más de quince días, precisamente cuando Hetty salió de casa. Y a partir de Stoniton, se han perdido sus huellas por completo.

Seth guardó silencio; no se le ocurría nada que pudiese explicar la fuga de Hetty.

—¿Tienes idea de la razón de esta conducta? —preguntó por fin.

—Tal vez no me amaba y se asustó al ver que se aproximaba la fecha de nuestra boda. Sin duda eso es lo que ha ocurrido —contestó Adam decidido a no dar ninguna otra razón.

—Parece que se levanta nuestra madre. ¿Se lo diremos?

—Todavía no —contestó Adam poniéndose en pie y apartándose el cabello del rostro, como para dominarse mejor—. No conviene decírselo todavía; además, debo emprender otro viaje después de ir al pueblo y a Hall Farm. Tampoco puedo decirte adonde voy, pero tú darás a entender a todo el mundo que me he ausentado por cuestiones de negocios, porque no quiero que nadie se entere de este asunto. Ahora voy a lavarme —añadió Adam dirigiéndose a la puerta del taller; pero, después de dar uno o dos pasos, se volvió y, fijando en su hermano una mirada tranquila y triste, añadió—: Tendré que llevarme todo el dinero que tenemos ahorrado, Seth, pero si me ocurre algo todo lo demás será tuyo, para que puedas cuidar de nuestra madre.

Seth estaba pálido y tembloroso, y comprendió que en todo aquello debía de haber un secreto terrible.

—Hermano —dijo con voz débil, y nunca llamaba «hermano» a Adam más que en los momentos solemnes—. Estoy seguro de que no harás nada que Dios no pueda bendecir.

—No tengas miedo, muchacho, pues sólo deseo cumplir el deber de un hombre.

La idea de que si explicaba sus preocupaciones a Lisbeth ella le agobiaría con sus interminables preguntas, fue suficiente para devolver a Adam su habitual firmeza y el dominio de sí mismo. Dijo pues a su madre, cuando ésta bajó, que se había sentido enfermo al regresar y que por aquella causa pasó la noche en Treddleston, y que el dolor de cabeza que aún tenía era la razón de su palidez y de sus ojos hundidos.

Ante todo decidió ir al pueblo, ocupar una hora en sus asuntos y comunicar luego a Burge su necesidad de ausentarse, rogándole, al mismo tiempo, que no lo comunicase a nadie; además, deseaba no ir a Hall Farm a la hora del almuerzo, cuando estuvieran allí los niños y los criados, y todo el mundo pudiera sorprenderse de que hubiese regresado sin Hetty. Esperó a que el reloj diera las nueve antes de abandonar el almacén de maderas del pueblo, y luego, a campo traviesa, se dirigió a la granja. Al aproximarse observó con gran satisfacción que el señor Poyser acudía a su encuentro; eso le evitaría la triste necesidad de entrar en la casa. El señor Poyser avanzaba alegre en aquella mañana de marzo; tal vez sentía ya la primavera. Se disponía a inspeccionar cómo herraban un caballo de tiro y empuñaba una escarda como compañero de camino. Se sorprendió mucho al ver a Adam, pero como no era hombre dado al pesimismo, preguntó:

—¿Es usted, Adam? ¿De modo que ha estado ausente todo este tiempo y no se ha traído a las muchachas? ¿Dónde están?

—No. No las he traído —contestó el joven volviéndose para indicar su deseo de acompañar al señor Poyser.

—¡Caramba! —exclamó Martin fijándose con más atención en el rostro del joven—. Tiene mala cara. ¿Ha ocurrido algo?

—Sí —contestó Adam con acento doloroso—. Ha ocurrido algo muy desagradable. No he podido encontrar a Hetty en Snowfield.

El bondadoso rostro del señor Poyser dio muestras de asombro y alarma.

—¿Que no la ha encontrado? ¿Qué le ha sucedido? —preguntó imaginándose ya algún accidente.

—No sé lo que le habrá ocurrido, pero el caso es que no fue a Snowfield. Tomó el coche para ir a Stoniton, pero después de llegar a esta población ya no he podido saber lo que fue de ella.

—¿Quiere decir que ha huido? —exclamó Martin deteniéndose y tan asombrado que ni siquiera se daba cuenta de la gravedad de sus palabras.

—Sin duda ha huido —replicó Adam—. Probablemente no quería casarse conmigo. No puede ser otra cosa. La pobrecilla debió de engañarse acerca de sus sentimientos.

Martin guardó silencio durante un par de minutos, mirando al suelo y arrancando la hierba con la escarda sin darse cuenta de lo que hacía. La lentitud de su comprensión crecía cuando el tema de la conversación era una calamidad. Por fin levantó los ojos y mirando a Adam le dijo:

—Esa muchacha no le merece, Adam. Me parece que yo no tengo ninguna culpa, aunque, como es mi sobrina, siempre he insistido en que se casara con usted. No puedo ofrecerle ninguna excusa, amigo mío, pero comprendo que ha de ser un golpe muy doloroso para usted.

Adam no pudo replicar palabra y el señor Poyser, después de dar unos pasos más, añadió:

—Seguro que se habrá marchado con objeto de emplearse en alguna casa como doncella, porque hace más de medio año se le metió esta manía en la cabeza y quiso que yo le diera mi consentimiento. En cambio yo deseaba algo mejor para ella —añadió meneando tristemente la cabeza—. Y no comprendo cómo ha tomado esa resolución, después de darle su palabra y de tenerlo todo preparado.

Adam tenía muy buenos motivos para no contradecir al señor Poyser y hasta él mismo pensó en la posibilidad de que tuviese razón, pues en realidad no le constaba que Hetty se hubiese marchado en busca de Arthur.

—Es mejor que haya obrado así —dijo en tono tan firme como pudo— si comprendió que no podía quererme por marido. Vale más huir que arrepentirse después. Espero que no la tratará mal si vuelve, como sin duda hará si le parece duro vivir alejada de su casa.

—Nunca volveré a quererla como antes —dijo Martin en tono decidido—. Se ha portado mal con usted y con nosotros. De todos modos no le volveré la espalda, porque es muy joven y ésa sólo habrá sido su primera falta. No sabe lo difícil que me resultará decírselo a su tía. ¿Por qué no habrá venido Dinah con usted? Habría podido tranquilizar mucho a mi mujer.

—Dinah no estaba en Snowfield, pues se marchó quince días antes y no me fue posible averiguar sus señas en Leeds; de lo contrario se la habría traído.

—Mejor habría hecho viviendo con sus parientes —exclamó indignado el señor Poyser— que ir a

predicar entre los extraños.

—Me veo obligado a dejarle, señor Poyser —dijo Adam—; tengo mucho que hacer.

—Sí. Vale más que se ocupe de sus asuntos y yo se lo diré a mi mujer cuando llegue a casa. Es un encargo muy difícil.

—Le ruego —añadió Adam— que durante una o dos semanas procure que no se entere nadie de lo ocurrido. Yo no se lo he dicho todavía a mi madre, porque no sabemos en qué parará este asunto.

—Sí, sí. Cuanto menos se hable de eso, mejor. No hay ninguna necesidad de decir que se han roto las relaciones y quizás no tardaremos en recibir noticias suyas. Deme la mano, muchacho. ¡Ojalá pudiese darle una compensación!

El señor Poyser pronunció estas palabras con voz entrecortada y Adam comprendió sus sentimientos; los dos hombres honrados se estrecharon la mano para expresar su mutua comprensión.

Nada impedía a Adam ya su inmediata partida. Encargó a Seth que fuese al cazadero para comunicar al caballero que Adam Bede se había visto obligado a emprender un viaje repentino y también que dijera lo mismo, y nada más, a cualquiera que preguntase por él. Si los Poyser se enteraban de que había vuelto a marcharse, supondrían por qué.

Había proyectado emprender el viaje al salir de Hall Farm, pero sintió el impulso de ir a visitar al señor Irwine para confiarse a él, y por fin resolvió hacerlo. Se disponía a emprender un largo y difícil viaje por mar sin que nadie supiese adonde iba. ¿Y si le ocurría alguna cosa? ¿Y si necesitaba la ayuda de alguien para encontrar a Hetty? Podía fiarse del señor Irwine. Su deseo de no comunicar a nadie el secreto de la joven tuvo que ceder ante la necesidad de que otra persona además de él mismo estuviera dispuesto a defenderla en el peor de los casos. Con respecto a Arthur, aunque éste no hubiera incurrido en un nuevo pecado, Adam comprendió que no tenía necesidad de guardar silencio si así lo exigía el interés de la misma Hetty.

«Debo hacerlo —pensó resolviéndose al fin—. Es lo más conveniente. No puedo actuar solo por más tiempo».

XXXIX

SE RECIBEN NOTICIAS

Adam tomó la dirección de Broxton y anduvo con paso vivo, consultando al mismo tiempo su reloj, pues temía que el señor Irwine hubiese salido a cazar. El temor y el apresuramiento le causaron una gran excitación antes de llegar a la puerta de la rectoría, y una vez allí descubrió en la grava las huellas recientes de los cascos de un caballo.

Pero estas huellas se dirigían hacia la puerta, y aunque había un caballo junto a la cuadra, éste no pertenecía al señor Irwine. Sin duda aquella mañana alguien había ido a visitar al rector para consultarle algún asunto, de modo que el señor Irwine tenía que estar en su casa. Pese a todo, Adam apenas pudo recuperar la calma lo suficiente para comunicar a Carrol que deseaba hablar con su señor.

El doble sufrimiento de lo cierto y lo incierto había empezado a debilitar las fuerzas de aquel hombre vigoroso. El mayordomo le miró extrañado mientras él se dejaba caer en un banco del vestíbulo y contemplaba distraído el reloj que colgaba de la pared opuesta. El criado dijo que su amo tenía visita, pero en aquel momento se oyó la puerta del estudio; al parecer se iba el visitante, y como Adam tenía prisa, el criado se dispuso a comunicarlo cuanto antes a su amo.

Adam continuó sentado y observando el reloj. El minutero recorrió cinco minutos y después diez con un tictac monótono e indiferente; el joven observaba su movimiento y escuchaba el ruido de la máquina como si tuviese alguna razón concreta para hacerlo. En los momentos de gran sufrimiento es frecuente que haya estas pausas, cuando nuestro cerebro aturdido no se halla en situación de pensar en nada y sólo se fija en cosas triviales. Es como si este atontamiento viniese a proporcionarnos algún descanso de un dolor que ni siquiera nos permite dormir.

Volvió Carrol y su aparición recordó a Adam la situación en que se hallaba. Fue introducido inmediatamente en el estudio y mientras Carrol decía:

—No sé quién es ese individuo tan raro que se ha ido. El señor lo ha hecho pasar al comedor. También mi amo tiene una cara muy extraña, como si estuviese asustado.

Adam no hizo caso de estas palabras, porque nada le importaban los asuntos de los demás, pero cuando penetró en el estudio y pudo contemplar el rostro del señor Irwine, comprendió que le ocurría algo, pues el párroco no mostraba la expresión amistosa y cordial acostumbrada. Sobre la mesa había una carta abierta y la mano del señor Irwine estaba posada en ella; la mirada que cambió con Adam no podía deberse sólo a la preocupación de algún asunto desagradable, porque luego fijó los ojos en la puerta como si la aparición del joven fuese algo muy angustioso para él.

—¿Quiere hablarme, Adam? —preguntó esforzándose en dar alguna firmeza a su voz—. Siéntese —añadió señalando una silla que se hallaba frente a él y a más de un metro de distancia.

Adam se sentó, diciéndose que aquella extraña frialdad del señor Irwine era otra dificultad que no esperaba. Pero cuando el joven se resolvía a hacer algo, no renunciaba a ello, a no ser que tuviera razones imperiosas.

—He venido a verle, señor, porque es la persona a quien más respeto en el mundo. He de comunicarle algo muy penoso, que oirá con dolor, del mismo modo como yo se lo contaré. Pero si hablo de las faltas de otras personas, no crea que lo hago sin motivos muy fundados.

El señor Irwine hizo un movimiento de afirmación con la cabeza, y Adam continuó con voz trémula:

—Según ya sabe, señor, estaba convenido que nos casase, a Hetty y a mí, el día quince de este mes. Yo creí que me amaba, y era el hombre más feliz de la parroquia, pero me ha sucedido una horrible desgracia.

El señor Irwine se puso en pie de un salto; pero luego, decidido a dominarse, se acercó a la ventana y miró a través de los cristales.

—Se ha marchado, señor, y no sabemos adonde. El viernes hizo quince días que salió, diciendo que iba a Snowfield, y yo fui el domingo pasado para traerla, pero supe que no había ido allá y que tomó el coche para Stoniton, donde se han perdido sus huellas. Ahora me dispongo a realizar un largo viaje para ver si la encuentro, y no puedo confiar a nadie más que a usted adonde me dirijo.

El señor Irwine se alejó de la ventana y volvió a sentarse.

—¿Y no tiene ninguna idea de la razón de su marcha? —preguntó.

—Es evidente que no quería casarse conmigo, señor —contestó Adam—. Debió de asustarse al ver tan próxima la fecha de la boda. Pero me temo que eso no es todo, porque en este asunto hay otro interesado.

En aquel momento, en el rostro ansioso del señor Irwine brilló un resplandor de alegría. Adam, que miraba al suelo, hizo una pausa. Lo que aún tenía que decir resultaba muy duro; sin embargo levantó la cabeza, miró al señor Irwine y continuó hablando, pues estaba resuelto a hacer lo que se había propuesto.

—Ya sabe quién es el hombre a quien tuve por mi mejor amigo. Me enorgullecía pasar el resto de mi vida trabajando para él, y éstos fueron mis sentimientos desde que ambos salimos de la niñez.

Como si el señor Irwine hubiese perdido el dominio de sí mismo, cogió el brazo de Adam, que reposaba en la mesa, y oprimiéndolo con gran fuerza, dijo con los labios pálidos y la voz apresurada:

—No, Adam, no. ¡Por Dios le ruego que no lo diga!

Sorprendido por la violencia del sentimiento del señor Irwine, Adam se arrepintió de las palabras que acababan de salir de sus labios y guardó un silencio angustioso. El señor Irwine aflojó la presión sobre el brazo de Adam y se sentó diciendo:

—Continúe; debo enterarme de todo.

—Ese hombre jugó con los sentimientos de Hetty y se portó con ella como no tenía derecho a hacerlo, dada la diferente posición social de ambos. Le hizo regalos y ambos salían a pasear juntos. Lo descubrí dos días antes de que él se marchase; los sorprendí mientras se besaban cuando se despedían en la alameda. Entonces yo no había dicho nada a Hetty de mi amor, aunque hacía mucho tiempo que la amaba y ella lo sabía. Pero a él le censuré su comportamiento y cruzamos palabras violentas y hasta algunos golpes. Después él me dijo solemnemente que no había ocurrido nada serio y que sólo se trataba de un flirteo sin importancia; pero yo le obligué a escribir una carta a Hetty diciéndole esto mismo, porque advertí con claridad, y gracias a varios detalles que hasta entonces no habían tenido ninguna importancia para mí, que él se había apoderado de su corazón y que Hetty estaba ya tan ilusionada que no podría amar a ningún otro hombre que la quisiera por esposa. Entregué la carta a Hetty y pareció que ella soportaba aquel disgusto mejor de lo que yo me había imaginado. Luego empezó a demostrarme cada vez mayor simpatía. Me atrevo a afirmar que la pobrecilla no conocía sus propios pensamientos, pero que los comprendió cuando ya era demasiado tarde. No quiero censurarla, porque estoy seguro de que nunca se propuso engañarme. Pero tuve motivos para creer que me amaba y… ya sabe lo demás, señor. Ahora sospecho que él obró con falsedad conmigo y que luego escribió a Hetty para que acudiese a su lado. Esto es lo que voy a averiguar, porque soy incapaz de volver al trabajo sin saber qué ha sido de ella.

Durante la relación de Adam el señor Irwine tuvo tiempo de recobrar el dominio de sí mismo, a pesar de las penosas ideas que había en su mente. Entonces recordó con amargura la mañana en que Arthur desayunó con él y pareció estar dispuesto a hacerle una confidencia. Era evidente que quiso confesarle lo que ocurría. Y si la conversación hubiese tomado otro giro… Si él mismo no hubiese sido tan delicado rehuyendo inmiscuirse en los secretos ajenos… Era cruel pensar que un detalle sin importancia le había impedido intervenir a tiempo para que no ocurriese aquella desgracia. Entonces vio de una vez la verdad de la historia entera. Y, por otra parte, sintió una compasión inmensa y el mayor respeto por aquel hombre sentado ante él, tan maltratado ya por la suerte y dispuesto a ir al encuentro de un dolor imaginario, cuando tan cerca tenía otro verdadero, terrible, y mucho más grande de lo que podía imaginarse. Su propia agitación se vio contenida por el terror respetuoso que suele infundirnos una gran angustia, pues la que tenía que comunicar a Adam le invadía incluso a él mismo. De nuevo posó la mano en el brazo apoyado en la mesa, pero aquella vez con expresión cariñosa, mientras decía solemnemente:

—Ha sufrido ya mucho en la vida, querido Adam, de modo que sabe soportar virilmente el dolor. Y ahora he de advertirle que va a sufrir uno bastante mayor que todos cuantos ha conocido. Por lo menos no es usted culpable de nada y por lo tanto ignora el peor de todos los dolores. ¡Dios ayude a quien no se encuentre en este caso!

Los dos hombres se miraron muy pálidos; Adam temblaba de pies a cabeza y el señor Irwine vacilaba paralizado por la compasión. Pero siguió diciendo:

—Esta mañana he recibido noticias de Hetty. No ha ido al encuentro de él. Está en Stonyshire, es decir, en Stoniton.

Adam se puso en pie de un salto, pero el señor Irwine volvió a apoyar la mano en su brazo y le dijo:

—Espere, Adam, tranquilícese. —Hizo una pausa y añadió—: Se halla en una situación tan desagradable que tal vez sufriría menos si la hubiese perdido para siempre.

Temblaron los labios de Adam, pero no pronunció una sola palabra. Luego hizo un esfuerzo y consiguió murmurar:

—Dígame, por Dios, lo que pasa.

—Ha sido detenida…, está en la cárcel.

Adam reaccionó como si lo hubiesen insultado. Acudió la sangre a su rostro y gritó:

—¿Por qué?

—Por un gran crimen… Por haber matado a su propio hijo.

—¡No puede ser! —exclamó Adam saltando de la silla y dando un paso hacia la puerta. Pero se volvió de pronto, apoyando la espalda en la librería y mirando con ferocidad al señor Irwine—. ¡No es posible! Ella no tenía ningún hijo. ¡No es culpable! ¿Quién la acusa?

—¡Dios quiera que sea inocente, Adam! Esto es lo que debemos esperar.

—Pero ¿quién la acusa? —exclamó Adam con violencia—. Cuéntemelo todo.

—Aquí hay una carta del magistrado ante quien compareció, y en el comedor está el agente de policía que la detuvo. No ha querido confesar su nombre, ni decir de dónde viene, pero me temo que se trata de Hetty. La descripción de su persona concuerda perfectamente, a excepción de que, según dicen, está muy pálida y, al parecer, enferma. En su bolso llevaba una libreta con cubierta de cuero y en ella dos nombres escritos. En la primera página se leía «Hetty Sorrel, Hayslope», y casi al final, «Dinah Morris, Snowfield». No quiere decir cuál es su nombre, lo niega todo y no contesta a ninguna pregunta. Por esta razón se me ha rogado que, en mi calidad de magistrado, tome las medidas necesarias para identificarla, ya que creen probable que su nombre sea el primero que figura en la libreta.

—Pero ¿qué pruebas tienen contra ella, en caso de que sea Hetty? —exclamó Adam con violencia y temblando de un modo extraordinario—. Yo no lo creo. Eso no es posible y ninguno de nosotros puede creerlo.

—Hay una prueba terrible de que tuvo la tentación de cometer el crimen; pero aún podemos tener la esperanza de que no lo haya cometido. Esfuércese en leer esta carta, Adam.

Este tomó el papel entre sus temblorosas manos y procuró fijar en él los ojos. Mientras tanto, el señor Irwine fue a dar algunas órdenes. Al volver, los ojos de Adam estaban aún fijos en la primera página; no podía leer ni comprender las palabras. Arrojó la carta sobre la mesa y cerró los puños.

—¡Esto es obra suya! —exclamó—. Si se ha cometido un crimen, el culpable es él y no ella. Él le enseñó a mentir. Él también me engañó a mí. Que comparezca ante el tribunal junto ella y entonces yo diré cómo se apoderó de su corazón y cómo la indujo a obrar mal y luego me mintió. ¿Acaso él ha de quedar en libertad, mientras castigan a la pobrecilla, tan débil y tan joven?

La imagen suscitada por estas últimas palabras dio una nueva dirección a los enloquecidos sentimientos de Adam. Guardó silencio, mirando a un ángulo de la estancia, como si viese algo, y luego, en tono de suplicante angustia, añadió:

—¡No puedo soportarlo! Eso es demasiado para mí. ¡Es horrible pensar que esa mujer sea mala!

El señor Irwine volvió a sentarse en silencio, pues sabía de sobra que las palabras de consuelo habrían sido inútiles en aquel momento. Además Adam había envejecido de pronto, como les ocurre a veces a las personas jóvenes en momentos de terrible emoción —la piel descolorida, las arrugas que rodeaban su boca temblorosa, el fruncimiento de las cejas—, y la visión de aquel hombre fuerte, trastornado por un invisible dolor, todo eso le conmovió tan profundamente que hablar le resultaba muy difícil. Adam estaba en pie e inmóvil, con los ojos fijos y sin ver nada. Era evidente que en aquel momento revivía toda la historia de su amor.

—No es posible que ella haya hecho eso —exclamó sin mover los ojos, como si hablase consigo mismo —. El miedo la obligó a ocultarlo… Yo la perdono por haberme engañado… Te perdono, Hetty, porque a ti te engañaron también… Pero nunca me lo harán creer…

Volvió a guardar silencio durante unos instantes y luego añadió con ferocidad:

—Voy a buscarle… Y lo llevaré a donde pueda ser testigo de su desgracia, para que nunca pueda olvidarse de ella, para que el remordimiento le persiga día y noche y no le abandone mientras viva… De nada le valdrán esta vez las mentiras; iré y lo traeré a rastras si es preciso.

Cuando se dirigía hacia la puerta, se detuvo de pronto y empezó a buscar el sombrero con la mirada, sin

parecer darse cuenta de dónde estaba ni en compañía de quién. El señor Irwine le había seguido y, cogiéndole por el brazo, le dijo con firmeza:

—No, Adam. Estoy seguro de que optará por quedarse para ver qué puede hacerse para ayudarla a ella, en vez de emprender un inútil viaje para vengarse. Ya será castigado sin necesidad de que usted intervenga. Además, ya no está en Irlanda, ahora seguramente se halla de regreso a su casa, o, por lo menos, llegaría antes que usted; porque su abuelo, según me consta, hace cosa de diez días que le escribió llamándole. Mejor será que me acompañe a Stoniton. He encargado un caballo para usted y saldremos en cuanto se haya tranquilizado.

Mientras el señor Irwine hablaba, Adam volvió a darse cuenta del lugar en que se hallaba. Se frotó el cabello y la frente y prestó atención.

—Recuerde —continuó diciendo el señor Irwine— que además de usted hay otras personas interesadas en este asunto. Por ejemplo, los buenos Poyser, a quienes esta desgracia causará una impresión considerable. Y espero de usted, Adam, que recordando su deber para con Dios y para con los hombres, se esforzará en hacer todo cuanto sea preciso en favor de esa joven.

En realidad, el señor Irwine propuso el viaje a Stoniton pensando en Adam, pues la actividad con algún propósito definido era el mejor medio de contrarrestar la violencia del sufrimiento de aquellas primeras horas.

—¿Quiere acompañarme a Stoniton, Adam? —preguntó después de una ligera pausa—. Ante todo, tenemos que convencernos de que se trata de Hetty. ¿No le parece?

—Sí, señor. Haré lo que crea más oportuno. ¿Y en cuanto a la familia Poyser?

—Mejor será que no sepan nada hasta mí regreso. Entonces estaré enterado de algunos detalles que ahora desconozco, y, desde luego, volveré lo antes que pueda. Venga, los caballos ya están preparados.

XL

La amargura

El señor Irwine regresó de Stoniton aquella misma noche, en una silla de posta, y las primeras palabras que Carrol le dijo al llegar fueron que el caballero Donnithorne había muerto. Lo habían encontrado inerte en su cama, a las diez de aquella mañana. Además, le dijo que la señora Irwine le esperaba despierta y que había encargado que no se acostase sin verla.

—¡Gracias a Dios que has regresado, Dauphin! —dijo la señora Irwine al ver entrar a su hijo—. Resulta que el mal estado del anciano caballero, que le obligó a llamar a Arthur de modo tan repentino tenía, sin duda, enorme importancia. Supongo que Carrol te habrá dicho ya que esta mañana encontraron a Donnithorne muerto en la cama. Otra vez creerás mis profecías, aunque me atrevo a decirte que no viviré lo suficiente para pronosticarte sino mi propia muerte.

—¿Y qué han hecho con Arthur? —preguntó el señor Irwine—. ¿Han mandado algún mensajero para esperarle en Liverpool?

—Sí, Ralph salió con este objeto antes de que nosotros recibiésemos la noticia. No sabes lo que me alegro de vivir todavía para ver a mi querido Arthur dueño del cazadero y administrando las propiedades con bondad y generosidad. Ahora será tan feliz como un rey.

A su pesar, el señor Irwine profirió un ligero gemido. Estaba agotado por la ansiedad y por la pena, y las ligeras palabras de su madre le resultaban casi intolerables.

—¿Qué te pasa, Dauphin? ¿Ha ocurrido algo desagradable? ¿O quizás piensas en el peligro que puede correr Arthur al cruzar el terrible canal de Irlanda en esta época del año?

—No, madre. No pensaba en eso. Pero no estoy de humor para alegrarme ahora.

—Te ha preocupado demasiado ese asunto legal que te obligó a ir a Stoniton. ¿De qué se trata, que no puedes decírmelo?

—Ya lo sabrá, madre. Por el momento no puedo decírselo. Buenas noches. Espero que podrá dormir ahora; ya no tengo nada más que comunicarle.

El señor Irwine desistió de enviar una carta al encuentro de Arthur, puesto que ya no serviría para apresurar su regreso; las noticias de la muerte de su abuelo le traerían con tanta celeridad como fuese posible. Se dispuso a acostarse para gozar de un descanso merecido antes de que llegase la mañana, y con ella el deber de comunicar aquellas horribles nuevas a Hall Farm y al hogar de Adam.

El joven no había regresado aún de Stoniton, pues no se decidía a ver a Hetty, pero tampoco a alejarse de ella.

—Es inútil, señor —dijo al rector—. Es inútil que regrese, porque no podría trabajar mientras ella esté aquí y tampoco tengo fuerzas para soportar la vista de las cosas y de las personas que rodean mi hogar. Alquilaré aquí una habitación, desde la cual pueda ver las paredes de la cárcel, y quizás lograré, a su debido tiempo, el permiso para visitarla.

Adam seguía creyendo que Hetty era inocente del crimen que se le imputaba; y el señor Irwine, comprendiendo que la convicción de su culpabilidad sería un dolor más para el joven, no le comunicó que el examen de los hechos la condenaba. Tampoco había ninguna razón para seguir agobiando más al pobre muchacho, y así, el rector, al despedirse, se limitó a decir:

—Si las pruebas llegasen a acusarla demasiado, Adam, todavía podemos esperar el perdón. Su juventud y otras circunstancias serían atenuantes en su favor.

—¡Ah! Convendría que la gente se enterase de cómo se vio obligada a obrar mal —exclamó Adam con

amargura—. Convendría que todos supieran que un distinguido caballero le hizo el amor y le arrebató la razón. Recuerde, señor, según me ha prometido, que dirá a mi madre, a Seth y a los habitantes de la granja, quién la llevó por el mal camino, porque, de lo contrario, pensarían de ella peor de lo que merece. Tenga en cuenta que hará un mal a la pobrecilla disculpándole a él, porque yo le creo a él más culpable, y sepa que si usted lo disculpa yo le acusaré.

—Creo que su petición es muy justa, Adam —replicó el señor Irwine—. Pero cuando esté más tranquilo juzgará a Arthur con mayor misericordia. Por ahora, yo digo solamente que su castigo corre a cargo de otras manos y no de las suyas.

El señor Irwine lamentaba mucho tener que referir la parte que Arthur había tomado en aquella triste historia, pues sentía por el joven un afecto paternal e incluso había estado muy orgulloso de él. Pero comprendió claramente que muy pronto se conocería el secreto, aun haciendo caso omiso de la decisión de Adam, pues no era posible esperar que Hetty persistiese en su obstinado silencio. Decidió no ocultar nada a los Poyser, y decírselo todo de una vez, porque ya no había tiempo para disimular la gravedad del suceso. El juicio de Hetty se celebraría durante la Cuaresma, o sea a la siguiente semana, en Stoniton. No era de esperar que Martin Poyser se escapase de ser llamado como testigo y, por consiguiente, convenía que estuviese enterado del asunto lo antes posible.

Antes de las diez de la mañana del martes, Hall Farm era la morada del dolor, a causa de la desgracia que había caído sobre ella, mucho peor que la muerte. La deshonra familiar era demasiado profunda, incluso a los ojos del bondadoso Martin Poyser hijo, para que nadie sintiera la menor compasión por Hetty. Él y su padre eran granjeros de sencilla mentalidad que estaban orgullosos de su intachable nombre, así como también de proceder de una familia cuyos individuos pudieron siempre llevar la cabeza muy alta, porque su vida fue correctísima desde que su apellido figuró por primera vez en el registro de la parroquia. Y Hetty los había deshonrado a todos, con una deshonra tal que jamás podría borrarse. Esta era la idea principal del padre y del hijo, que sentían la quemadura del deshonor que destruía en ellos toda otra sensibilidad; y el señor Irwine se sorprendió en extremo al observar que la señora Poyser se mostraba mucho menos severa que su marido. Muchas veces nos extraña la severidad de que en determinadas ocasiones dan muestras las personas de carácter suave; y la razón es que éstas son más susceptibles de dejarse guiar por las convenciones tradicionales.

—Estoy dispuesto a pagar cuanto sea necesario para lograr que la pongan en libertad —dijo el buen señor Poyser una vez se hubo marchado el señor Irwine y mientras el abuelo lloraba sentado en el sillón—. Pero no quiero acercarme a ella ni volver a verla en la vida, y nunca más, ni en esta parroquia ni en otra, podremos llevar la cabeza alta. El párroco ha hablado de la gente que nos compadece y eso es más que nada algo desagradable.

—¿Que nos compadecen? —replicó el abuelo—. Nunca, en toda mi vida, necesité la compasión de nadie. ¡Desgraciado de mí, que me veré compadecido a los setenta y dos años de edad, que cumplí el día de Santo Tomás, y cuando ya me quedan muy pocos que pasar en la tierra! Y por si esto no fuera bastante, tendré que ir a morir a otro sitio y unos desconocidos me llevarán a la tumba.

—No se inquiete, padre —dijo la señora Poyser, que había hablado muy poco sorprendida por la extraordinaria severidad y decisión de su marido—. Siempre estará rodeado de sus hijos y tanto sus nietos como su nieta crecerán igual en otra parroquia que en ésta.

—No, ya no podremos continuar en esta comarca —dijo el señor Poyser mientras grandes lágrimas resbalaban por sus redondas mejillas—. ¡Tanto que nos habíamos preocupado de que el viejo caballero nos avisara el día de la Virgen de que no podía renovar nuestro arrendamiento! Ahora seré yo mismo el que esta tarde busque a alguien que pueda encargarse de cosechar lo que he sembrado, porque no quiero continuar más de lo necesario en las tierras que pertenecen a esa familia. ¡Y yo que siempre tuve a Arthur por un hombre digno, y me alegraba al pensar que podía llegar a ser nuestro señor! Nunca más me descubriré ante él ni entraré en ninguna iglesia donde él esté… Ese hombre ha traído la vergüenza a una familia respetable… Y fingía ser amigo de todo el mundo… El pobre Adam… ¡Y mira que ha sido amigo de Adam! Eso sí, y mientras le hablaba de un modo muy agradable y le hacía propuestas amistosas, envenenaba la vida del pobre muchacho; él tampoco podrá quedarse en esta comarca.

—Pues tú tendrás que ir al tribunal y confesar que eres pariente de ella —observó el anciano—. Y quien pagará los platos rotos es esa pobrecilla Totty, quien aunque no tiene más que cuatro años, le echarán algún día en cara que su prima fue juzgada por el tribunal por haber asesinado a su hijo.

—Ella no tiene ninguna culpa de lo ocurrido —replicó la señora Poyser profiriendo un sollozo—; pero el que está arriba cuidará de esa criatura inocente, porque, de lo contrario, no sería cierto nada de lo que nos enseñan en la iglesia. Lo peor de todo sería morir y dejar a mis pobres hijos sin nadie que los cuidara.

—Si supiéramos dónde está Dinah podríamos llamarla —dijo el señor Poyser—. Pero Adam afirmó que no había dejado sus señas en Leeds.

—Seguro que vive con aquella mujer que era amiga de su tía Mary —replicó la señora Poyser algo tranquilizada por aquella idea de su marido—. Muchas veces he oído a Dinah hablar de ella, aunque no recuerdo qué nombre le daba. Pero podemos preguntar a Seth Bede. Sin duda alguna lo sabe, porque parece que se trata de una predicadora a quien consideran mucho los metodistas.

—Haré llamar a Seth —dijo entonces el señor Poyser—. Le mandaré aviso por medio de Alick o le rogaré que nos comunique el nombre de esa mujer, y tú podrías escribir una carta para mandarla a Treddleston tan pronto como sepamos las señas.

—De poco sirven las cartas cuando estamos apurados y deseamos que venga alguien —dijo la señora Poyser—. Además, puede ser que ella ande de un lado para otro y tarde en recibir nuestra carta.

Antes de que Alick llegase con el mensaje, también Lisbeth había pensado en Dinah y había dicho a Seth:

—No habrá consuelo para nosotros en este mundo hasta que puedas lograr que Dinah Morris venga a nuestro lado, como hizo cuando murió mi pobre marido. Me gustaría mucho que viniese a cogerme de la mano y a hablarme como lo hizo entonces. Ella me diría cosas convenientes y descubriría algo bueno en todo eso para evitar que se destroce el corazón de ese pobre muchacho que jamás ha hecho nada malo en la vida, pues siempre ha sido el mejor amigo que se podía hallar en la comarca. ¡Oh, pobre hijo mío! ¡Pobre Adam!

—Supongo que no querrás que te deje sola para ir en busca de Dinah —observó Seth mientras su madre sollozaba.

—¿Ir a buscarla? —preguntó luego Lisbeth levantando los ojos e interrumpiendo sus sollozos, como el niño que llora y deja de hacerlo repentinamente ante la promesa de un consuelo—. ¿Sabes acaso dónde está ahora?

—Muy lejos, madre. Está en Leeds, que es una gran ciudad. Pero yo podría estar de vuelta dentro de tres días si así lo deseas.

—No, no, no me abandones. Sin embargo, sería mejor que fueses a ver a tu hermano y volvieses a decirme qué hace. El señor Irwine me prometió venir a comunicármelo. Pero cuando él me habla apenas entiendo lo que me dice. Vale más que vayas tú, puesto que Adam no me permitiría que fuese yo. ¿No podrías escribir una carta a Dinah? Bastante te gusta escribir cuando nadie te lo pide.

—El caso es que no sé dónde vive en esa ciudad —replicó Seth—. Si voy allí, puedo averiguarlo, preguntando a los miembros de la Sociedad. Quizás si escribo en el sobre «Sarah Billiamson, predicadora metodista, Leeds», recibirá la carta, porque es casi seguro que Dinah viva en casa de ésta.

En aquel momento llegó Alick con el mensaje de Hall Farm, y al saber Seth que la señora Poyser escribiría a Dinah, abandonó el propósito de hacerlo él mismo; en cambio se dirigió a la granja para decirles las señas que podrían poner en el sobre, avisándoles también de que quizás hubiese alguna demora en la entrega de la carta, puesto que él desconocía la dirección exacta.

Al salir de casa de Lisbeth, el señor Irwine se dirigió a la de Jonathan Burge, a quien también era preciso informar de la razón que obligaba a Adam a estar ausente durante algún tiempo; y antes de las seis de aquella tarde pocas eran las personas de Broxton y Hayslope que no se hubiesen ya enterado de la triste noticia. El señor Irwine no había mencionado a Burge el nombre de Arthur. Y, sin embargo, la historia de su conducta con Hetty, con todas sus terribles consecuencias, fueron pronto del dominio público como la muerte de su abuelo y la toma de posesión de su herencia. Martin Poyser no creyó necesario guardar silencio ante dos vecinos que se atrevieron a visitarle, para estrecharle tristemente la mano, en el primer día de su dolor. Y Carrol, que tenía las orejas abiertas para todo lo que ocurría en la rectoría, llegó a conocer una versión bastante exacta de la historia y tuvo numerosas oportunidades de divulgarla.

Uno de los vecinos que fueron a visitar a Poyser y le estrecharon la mano en silencio durante unos minutos fue Barde Massey. Tras cerrar la escuela, se dirigió a la rectoría, adonde llegó hacia las siete y media de la tarde. Hizo presentar sus cumplidos al señor Irwine y le rogó que le perdonara por molestarle a aquellas horas, pero añadió que tenía que decirle algo. Fue introducido en el estudio y muy pronto compareció el señor Irwine.

—¿Qué hay, Barde? —dijo tendiéndole la mano. Este no era su modo habitual de saludar al maestro de escuela, pero el dolor nos induce a tratar del mismo modo a todos los que simpatizan con nosotros.

—Supongo, señor, que ya se imaginará a lo que vengo —dijo Barde.

—Sin duda a saber la verdad de las tristes noticias que habrán llegado a sus oídos… acerca de Hetty Sorrel.

—No, señor. Sólo deseo enterarme de lo que se relaciona con Adam Bede. Tengo entendido que le dejó en Stoniton, y le ruego que haga el favor de decirme cómo está ese pobre muchacho y qué se propone hacer. En cuanto a esa muchacha a quien se han tomado la molestia de meter en la cárcel… no me importa nada absolutamente… a no ser por el daño o el bien que pueda hacer a un hombre honrado, a un muchacho a quien quiero y de quien espero que puede hacer gala en el mundo de los escasos conocimientos que le he transmitido. Sepa, señor, que es el único alumno que he tenido en esta región de estúpidos capaz de comprender algo de matemáticas. Si el pobre muchacho no hubiese tenido que trabajar tanto, habría podido llegar a un grado mucho más elevado y entonces quizás no habría ocurrido nada de eso… Es posible que no hubiese sucedido.

Barde estaba excitado por la caminata y por la impresión recibida ante semejantes noticias, y en aquella primera ocasión que se le ofreció para desahogarse, se mostró incapaz de contenerse. Pero se interrumpió para secarse la frente y enjugarse las lágrimas.

—Le ruego que me perdone, señor —dijo cuando esta pausa le hubo dado tiempo para reflexionar—, si de este modo exteriorizo mis sentimientos, igual que lo hace mi estúpida perra, que se pone a aullar cuando nadie le escucha. En realidad, he venido a escucharle y no a hablar…, si usted quiere tomarse la molestia de decirme lo que hace el pobre muchacho.

—No se violente, Barde —dijo el señor Irwine—. El caso es que en este momento lo ignoro tanto como usted. Estoy muy apenado, y créame que me cuesta mucho guardar en silencio mis propios sentimientos para ocuparme de los de los demás. Comparto su ansiedad por Adam, aunque no es la única persona cuyos sentimientos me importan en este momento. Se propone permanecer en Stoniton hasta después del juicio que, probablemente, se celebrará dentro de ocho días. Ha tomado allí una habitación y le alenté a que lo hiciera, porque creo que en la actualidad conviene que esté lejos de su casa. El pobre muchacho aún cree en la inocencia de Hetty… Desea hacer acopio de valor para verla, si le dejan, y desde luego no quiere alejarse del lugar donde ella se encuentra.

—¿Cree pues que esa muchacha es culpable? ¿Opina que la ahorcarán?

—Temo que corre un gran peligro de que la condenen, porque las pruebas son muy desfavorables para ella. Además, existe el agravante de que lo niega todo. Niega incluso haber tenido un hijo, y eso en contra de la evidencia. Yo la visité y también conmigo guardó el mayor silencio; al verme retrocedió como un animal asustado; nunca me ha impresionado tanto un cambio como el suyo. Sin embargo, creo que en el peor de los casos podremos lograr que la perdonen, aunque sólo sea para favorecer a las personas inocentes que están relacionadas con este asunto.

—¡Eso es una tontería! —exclamó Barde olvidando en su irritación a quién hablaba en aquellos momentos—. Perdóneme, señor, pero quiero decir que es una tontería que las personas inocentes se preocupen de si la ahorcan o no. Creo que cuanto antes quiten del mundo a mujeres como ésa, mejor; y también convendría que condenasen a la misma pena a los hombres que son cómplices de tales crímenes. ¿Qué bien ha de resultar de que vivan unos bichos como ésos y de que sigan comiendo el pan de los seres racionales? Y si Adam es lo bastante imbécil para preocuparse de ella, yo no quiero que sufra más de lo necesario. ¿Está muy triste el pobre muchacho? —añadió Barde quitándose las gafas y volviendo a ponérselas como si con ello quisiera consolarse a su imaginación.

—Sí, temo que el pobre está muy dolido. Da muestras de haberse impresionado mucho y dada la actitud violenta de que dio muestras ayer, me habría gustado mucho quedarme a su lado. Mañana volveré a Stoniton y tengo bastante confianza en la fuerza de voluntad de Adam para esperar que soportará lo peor sin sentirse inclinado a tomar ninguna decisión imprudente.

El señor Irwine exteriorizaba así sus pensamientos y apenas se daba cuenta de que hablaba a Barde Massey; con la última frase quiso expresar la posibilidad de que Adam, impulsado por su deseo de venganza, buscara un enfrentamiento que habría de tener un fin más funesto que el ocurrido en la alameda. Esta posibilidad aumentaba la ansiedad con que esperaba la llegada de Arthur. Pero Barde creyó que el señor Irwine se refería al suicidio y en su rostro se pintó la alarma.

—Voy a decirle lo que pienso, señor —replicó—, y espero que lo apruebe. Cerraré mi escuela y si vienen los alumnos, que se vuelvan. Iré a Stoniton para velar por Adam hasta que haya terminado este asunto. Fingiré que deseo presenciar las sesiones del tribunal; a eso él no puede oponerse. ¿Qué le parece, señor?

—Muy bien —dijo el señor Irwine indeciso—. Eso tendría algunas ventajas y le agradezco la amistad que demuestra por ese pobre muchacho, Bartle… Pero tenga mucho cuidado con lo que le dice, porque me temo que no siente mucha compasión por la debilidad de la pobre Hetty.

—Confíe en mí, señor, confíe en mí. Sé lo que quiere decirme. En mis tiempos yo también fui un tonto, pero eso debe quedar entre usted y yo. No hablaré mucho con Adam, sino que me limitaré a vigilarle,

procuraré que coma y le dirigiré alguna palabra de consuelo.

—Obrando así —contestó el señor Irwine algo tranquilizado con respecto a la discreción de Bartle— creo que realizará una buena acción. También convendría que comunicase a la madre y al hermano de Adam su intención de ir a su lado.

—Sí, señor, sí. —Bartle se levantó y se quitó las gafas—. Así lo haré, aunque la madre de ese muchacho no hace más que quejarse continuamente. No me gusta oírla, si bien reconozco que es una mujer limpia y aseada, y no una de esas puercas de pueblo. Buenas tardes, señor, y le agradezco los momentos que me ha dedicado. En este asunto es amigo de todo el mundo, sí, de todo el mundo. No hay duda de que ha tomado sobre usted una pesada carga.

—Adiós, Bartle; hasta que nos veamos en Stoniton, como sin duda nos veremos.

Bartle salió de la rectoría evitando las preguntas de Carrol, y en cuanto vio a Vixen, que se acercaba trotando con sus cortas patas, exclamó muy airado:

—No tendré más remedio que llevarte conmigo, aunque como mujer no sirves para nada. Si te dejase aquí serías capaz de meterte en algún lío que te ocasionara la muerte. Sí, no me lo niegues. Y hasta quizás te caerías en una trampa de lobo. Además no tengo ninguna duda de que frecuentarías las malas compañías y que meterías el hocico en todos los agujeros y rincones que no te incumbieran. Pero te advierto que si cometes algún acto deshonroso, yo no te apoyaré. ¿Lo oyes? Ten la seguridad de que te dejaré abandonada. ¡No lo olvides!

XLI

La víspera del juicio

Una habitación alta, en una calle triste de Stoniton, con dos camas, una de ellas sobre el suelo. Eran las diez de la noche del jueves, y junto a la oscura pared que había frente a la ventana cerrada e impedía que la luz de la luna luchara con la de una pobre vela de sebo, estaba Bartle Massey fingiendo leer, aunque, en realidad, miraba por encima de las gafas a Adam Bede, que se había sentado en el lado opuesto de la estancia.

Si no se lo dijéramos al lector, éste no habría reconocido al joven; estaba mucho más flaco, tenía los ojos hundidos y no se había afeitado; parecía un enfermo que acaba de abandonar el lecho. Su cabello negro y espeso le cubría casi toda la frente y no se preocupaba de apartarlo para observar mejor lo que le rodeaba. Tenía un brazo apoyado sobre el respaldo de la silla y parecía estar contemplando sus manos cruzadas. Pero al oír una llamada a la puerta se levantó.

—Ya está aquí —dijo Bartle Massey levantándose a su vez para abrir.

Era el señor Irwine; Adam se quedó de pie, con instintivo respeto, mientras el señor Irwine se acercaba a él y le ofrecía la mano.

—Me he retrasado, Adam —dijo aceptando la silla que Bartle le ofrecía—. Pero tardé en salir de Broxton más de lo que me proponía, aparte de que desde mi llegada he estado muy ocupado. Ahora ya he terminado, por lo menos lo que se puede hacer hoy. Sentémonos pues.

Adam tomó maquinalmente su silla, y Barde, a falta de otro asiento, se acomodó en la cama que quedaba en segundo término.

—¿La ha visto, señor? —preguntó Adam con voz trémula.

—Sí, Adam. El capellán y yo hemos pasado un largo rato con ella.

—¿Le ha preguntado, señor…? ¿Le dijo algo acerca de mí?

—Sí —contestó el señor Irwine después de ligera vacilación—. Le hablé de usted. Le dije que deseaba verla antes del juicio, si ella lo consentía.

Mientras el señor Irwine hizo una pausa, Adam lo miró con ojos interrogantes.

—Ya sabe que se niega a ver a todo el mundo, Adam. No se trata sólo de usted…; alguna influencia fatal parece haber cerrado su corazón contra sus amigos y parientes. Por eso se ha limitado a contestar «no» a mí y al capellán. Hace tres o cuatro días, antes de que le hablara de usted, cuando yo le pregunté si quería ver a algún individuo de su familia, quizás para franquearse con él, ella se echó a temblar y replicó: «Dígales que no vengan a verme. No quiero ver a nadie».

Adam inclinó la cabeza y se quedó silencioso. Los tres callaron durante unos momentos y luego Irwine dijo:

—No quisiera aconsejarle contra sus propios sentimientos, Adam, si éstos se inclinan a verla mañana, aun sin su consentimiento. Es muy posible, a pesar de que las apariencias indican lo contrario, que esa visita pueda afectarla de un modo favorable. Pero lamento tener que decir que apenas tengo alguna esperanza de que eso ocurra. No pareció conmovida cuando mencioné su nombre; se limitó a decir «no» del mismo modo frío y obstinado que de costumbre; y si este encuentro no tuviese efectos favorables sobre ella, para usted no sería más que un sufrimiento inútil e intenso. Está muy cambiada.

Adam se puso en pie y luego tomó el sombrero que estaba sobre la mesa, pero se quedó inmóvil y miró al señor Irwine como si quisiera dirigirle una pregunta difícil de formular. Bartle Massey se levantó sin hacer ruido, dio vuelta a la llave en la cerradura y luego la quitó y se la guardó en el bolsillo.

—¿Ha vuelto él? —preguntó Adam por fin.

—No —contestó el señor Irwine—. Deje el sombrero, Adam, a no ser que quiera salir conmigo a tomar el fresco. Mucho me temo que no ha salido todavía.

—No tiene ninguna necesidad de engañarme, señor —dijo Adam con dureza y en tono de enojada sospecha—. Nada debe temer de mí, pues sólo quiero justicia. Quiero que él sufra lo mismo que ella. Lo ocurrido es cosa suya… Ella era una pobre niña, capaz de conquistar el corazón de todo el mundo… Nada me importa lo que haya hecho, porque él fue quien la obligó. Y es preciso que lo sepa, que lo comprenda y, si hay un Dios justo, entenderá el crimen que ha cometido al hundir en el pecado y en la desgracia a una pobre criatura como ésa.

—No le engaño, Adam —contestó el señor Irwine—. Arthur Donnithorne no ha vuelto aún y no se le esperaba cuando salí de Broxton. Le he dejado una carta y así se enterará de lo que ha ocurrido en cuanto llegue.

—Veo que a usted nada le importa eso —exclamó Adam indignado—. No hace caso siquiera de que la pobre esté sumida en la vergüenza y en la desgracia, y él, en cambio, lo ignora todo y no sufre absolutamente nada.

—Tenga presente, Adam, que lo sabrá y sufrirá larga y amargamente. Tiene corazón y tiene conciencia. Estoy seguro de ello, pues conozco muy bien su carácter. También estoy completamente convencido de que no cayó en la tentación sin haber sostenido consigo mismo una lucha verdaderamente desesperada. Es posible que sea un hombre débil, pero no un criminal ni un monstruo de egoísmo. Estoy persuadido de que eso será para él un golpe cuyos efectos sufrirá durante toda su vida. ¿Por qué quiere vengarse de ese modo? Recuerde que ninguna de las torturas que pudiera infligirle la beneficiaría a ella en lo más mínimo.

—No. ¡Oh, Dios mío, no! —gimió Adam dejándose caer en la silla—. Pero lo más horrible de todo es que eso no puede deshacerse. ¡Mi pobre Hetty…! ¡Ya no podrá volver a ser mi dulce Hetty…! ¡El ser más hermoso que Dios crió…, que me sonreía…, incluso creo que me amaba…, y era tan buena…!

La voz de Adam fue perdiendo volumen hasta que no fue más que un ronco murmullo, como si hablase consigo mismo. Pero luego, repentinamente, se quedó mirando al señor Irwine y exclamó:

—Pero ¿es tan culpable como dicen? Usted no lo cree, señor, ¿verdad? No es posible que ella haya hecho eso.

—Quizás nunca lo sabremos con certeza, Adam —contestó el señor Irwine con afectuoso acento—. En estos casos se forma el juicio basándose en las pruebas y, sin embargo, por falta de un pequeño detalle podemos sufrir una grave equivocación. Pero suponga lo peor; no tiene derecho a decir que él es culpable del crimen y que debería recibir el castigo. No corresponde a los hombres el repartir la culpabilidad moral y el castigo. Es imposible evitar los errores cuando se quiere señalar al culpable de un acto criminal, y el problema de la responsabilidad que verdaderamente le cabe a un hombre por las consecuencias imprevistas de sus propios actos, es tan grande que deberíamos temblar al pensar en ella. Las malas consecuencias que un sencillo acto de egoísmo puede contener constituyen un pensamiento tan horrible que sin duda debería despertar algún sentimiento menos peligroso que el deseo de castigar. Usted, Adam, cuando esté tranquilo, será muy capaz de comprender eso. Ni por un momento se figure que no me hago cargo de la angustia que despierta en usted ese deseo de venganza, pero piense que si obedece a su pasión, porque es pasión y se engaña al llamarla justicia, podría ocurrirle lo mismo que a Arthur, y tal vez peor, porque su pasión le arrastraría, quizás, a cometer un crimen horrible.

—No, no sería peor —dijo Adam amargamente—. No creo que pueda ser peor. Nada me importaría cometer una maldad de la que tuviese que sufrir yo solo, pero no quisiera haber obligado a esa pobrecilla a cometer un crimen y luego ver cómo la castigan, en tanto que a mí no me culpan de nada. Y sólo por un poco de placer, como si ese hombre no tuviese en el pecho un corazón humano. ¿Cree que él no pudo prever lo que ha ocurrido? De sobra lo supo; no tenía derecho a esperar que sus actos pudiesen acarrear a la pobre Hetty otra cosa que la vergüenza y el deshonor. Y, sin embargo, trató de salir del paso con algunas mentiras. No. Se ahorca a muchas personas que no son culpables de un crimen tan grande. Deje que un hombre haga lo que quiera, si sabe que el castigo ha de recaer sobre él solo y no es tan cobarde y egoísta como para quedarse a un lado mientras el castigo cae sobre otra persona.

—En eso vuelve a engañarse en parte, Adam. No existe ningún acto criminal cuyo castigo recaiga sobre un solo hombre. Es imposible que se aísle usted mismo y diga que el mal que está en usted no ha de extenderse. Las vidas humanas se hallan de tal manera relacionadas unas con otras como el aire que respiramos; el mal se propaga de un modo tan necesario como la misma enfermedad. Comprendo y siento la extensión terrible de sufrimiento que ese pecado de Arthur ha causado a los demás. Pero lo mismo sucede con todos los pecados que hacen sufrir a otros, además de a quienes los cometen. Un acto de venganza por

su parte contra Arthur no sería más que otro mal que vendría a sumarse a los que ya sufrimos, y ocasionaría el mayor dolor a todos aquellos que se aman. Y al cometer un crimen impulsado por la ciega furia, no remediaría ninguno de los males presentes, sino que añadiría a ellos otros nuevos. Puede decirme quizás que no medita ningún acto de venganza fatal; pero los pensamientos de su mente son los que harían nacer tales acciones mientras siguiera albergando esas ideas, mientras no comprendiese que el querer castigar a Arthur sólo obedece al deseo de venganza y no a la justicia, y que, por consiguiente, corre peligro de cometer un gran delito. Recuerde lo que usted mismo me dijo acerca de sus sentimientos después de haber dado a Arthur aquel fuerte golpe en la alameda.

Adam guardó silencio, pues las últimas palabras suscitaron una vivida imagen del pasado, y el señor Irwine le dejó entregado a sus pensamientos mientras hablaba con Barde Massey acerca del entierro del viejo señor Donnithorne y de otros asuntos de menor interés. Al fin Adam se volvió y en un tono más normal dijo:

—No le he preguntado acerca de los habitantes de Hall Farm, señor. ¿Ha venido el señor Poyser?

—Sí. Esta noche se halla en Stoniton. Pero no pude aconsejarle que viniera a verle, Adam. El pobre hombre está muy afectado y es mejor que no le vea hasta que usted esté más tranquilo.

—¿Ha ido Dinah a su casa, señor? Seth me dijo que la habían llamado.

—No. El señor Poyser me comunicó que aún no había llegado cuando él salió. Temen que la carta no haya llegado a sus manos, porque al parecer desconocían sus señas.

Adam se quedó pensativo unos instantes, y luego dijo:

—No sé si Dinah sentirá deseos de verla, aunque quizás los Poyser se opusieran, puesto que ellos mismos no quieren visitarla. Sin embargo, creo que Dinah se decidirá a hablarle, porque los metodistas no tienen ningún reparo en frecuentar las cárceles. Seth me aseguró que ella obraría así. Dinah siempre la trató con mucho cariño, aunque no sé si pudo hacerle algún bien. ¿La conoce usted, señor?

—Sí. Incluso sostuve con ella una conversación y me pareció una joven muy agradable. Y ahora que la menciona, le diré que me gustaría mucho que viniese, porque es posible que una mujer suave y cariñosa como ella inclinase a Hetty a abrir su corazón. El capellán de la cárcel es hombre de maneras algo bruscas.

—De todos modos, aunque viniese sería inútil —dijo Adam tristemente.

—Si hubiese pensado antes en esta solución, habría tomado algunas medidas para encontrarla —dijo el señor Irwine—, pero temo que ya es demasiado tarde. En fin, Adam, tengo que marcharme. Procure descansar esta noche. Dios le bendiga. Le veré mañana temprano.

XLII

La mañana del juicio

A la una del día siguiente, Adam estaba solo en su alta y triste habitación; su reloj se hallaba sobre la mesa y al alcance de su mirada, como si pretendiera contar los largos minutos. No sabía lo que podrían decir los testigos en el juicio, pues él mismo había evitado conocer los detalles relacionados con la detención y la acusación de Hetty. Aquel muchacho activo y valeroso, que sin vacilar se habría enfrentado a cualquier peligro o trabajo para librar a Hetty de una desgracia, se sintió impotente para presenciar un daño y un sufrimiento irremediables. Su cariño, que habría sido una fuerza impulsora de ser posible emprender alguna acción, se convirtió en angustia al verse obligado a observar la más absoluta pasividad; o bien buscó una salida activa al pensar en aplicar la justicia a Arthur. Las naturalezas enérgicas, fuertes para realizar grandes hazañas, se alejan con frecuencia de los que sufren sin esperanza, como si tuviesen el corazón duro. A ello les obliga el dolor que se apodera de ellos. Y retroceden movidas por un instinto que no pueden dominar, del mismo modo como retrocederían ante un gran dolor físico. Adam estaba dispuesto a visitar a Hetty, si ella lo consentía, por creer que podría resultar algún bien para la joven y ayudarla a olvidar aquella dureza terrible de que le habían hablado. Si ella comprendía que Adam no le guardaba rencor, tal vez le abriese su corazón. Pero tomó esta resolución sólo a costa de un gran esfuerzo. Temblaba ante la idea de ver su cambiado rostro, del mismo modo que una mujer asustada tiembla al pensar en el bisturí del cirujano; y prefería pasar aquellas horas de incertidumbre dolorosa antes de soportar la agonía de presenciar el juicio.

El sufrimiento profundo e indescriptible puede ser llamado bautismo, regeneración e iniciación de un nuevo estado. Los tristes recuerdos, los amargos pesares y la dolorosa compasión, así como las súplicas al derecho invisible, todas las emociones intensas que llenaron los días y las noches de la semana anterior y que, de nuevo, se presentaban a él como una ansiosa multitud en las horas de aquella mañana, daban a Adam la impresión de que todos los años anteriores de su vida habían transcurrido en una existencia soñolienta y le hacían creer que acababa de despertarse para experimentar, con tremenda intensidad, toda clase de sensaciones. Le parecía que siempre había dado muy poca importancia al sufrimiento de los hombres; y que todo lo que antes había soportado y denominaba dolor, no era más que un simple arañazo o un ligero golpe que no había dejado ninguna huella. Sin duda una gran angustia puede realizar el trabajo de muchos años y es posible que salgamos de tal bautismo de dolor con el alma llena de nueva comprensión y de nueva piedad.

—¡Oh, Dios mío! —gimió el joven mientras se apoyaba en la mesa y contemplaba la blanca esfera del reloj—. ¿Es posible que los hombres hayan sufrido antes, como yo mismo… y que las pobres y desgraciadas criaturas indefensas hayan sufrido como ella…? ¿Que eso le ocurra a esa pobre desgraciada que, hace tan poco tiempo, era tan hermosa y parecía tan feliz… cuando besaba a los miembros de su familia, que le deseaban toda suerte de felicidades…? ¡Oh, pobre Hetty mía…! ¿Recordarás acaso esa escena?

Adam se sobresaltó y dirigió los ojos hacia la puerta. Vixen había empezado a gemir y en la escalera se oía ya el ruido del bastón de un cojo. Era Barde Massey que volvía. ¿Habría terminado todo?

Entró el maestro de escuela y, acercándose a Adam, le cogió la mano y le dijo:

—He venido a verte, hijo mío, aprovechando unos momentos en que todo el mundo ha salido de la sala del tribunal.

El corazón de Adam latió con tanta fuerza que no pudo replicar cosa alguna. Solamente respondió al apretón de la mano de su amigo y éste, acercando la otra silla, se sentó junto a él y se quitó el sombrero y

las gafas.

—Nunca me había ocurrido antes eso de salir con las gafas puestas. Me había olvidado de ellas por completo.

El anciano hizo esta observación trivial creyendo que valía más no reaccionar a la agitación de Adam, pues así éste comprendería de un modo indirecto que aún no podía comunicarle nada decisivo.

—Ahora —dijo levantándose otra vez— quiero que comas un poco de pan y bebas del vino que nos ha mandado el señor Irwine. Se enojaría mucho conmigo si no te hiciera comer y beber. Ven —añadió, tomando la botella y el pan y poniendo un poco de vino en un vaso—. Yo también tomaré algo. Ven a beber conmigo, muchacho.

Adam alejó con suavidad el vaso y dijo en tono de súplica:

—Cuénteme lo que ha ocurrido, señor Massey. Dígamelo todo. ¿Esta allí ella? ¿Han empezado ya?

—Sí, hijo mío. Empezaron cuando llegué yo; pero van muy despacio, mucho. Además, el abogado defensor aprovecha la ocasión para meter baza en cuanto puede, y luego pierde mucho tiempo preguntando a los testigos y disputando con los demás abogados. Eso es todo lo que puede hacer a cambio del dinero que le han dado, que es una gran suma. Sí, muy importante. Es un hombre muy inteligente y con unos ojos capaces de encontrar una aguja en un pajar. Al hombre que no tenga sentimientos le gustará, quizás, enterarse de lo que ocurre ante el tribunal, pero el que sea de carácter tierno y cariñoso, se volvería tonto en aquel lugar. Créeme que con gusto renunciaría a las cifras para siempre a cambio de poder traerte alguna buena noticia.

—Pero ¿se presenta mal el caso para ella? —preguntó Adam—. Comuníqueme lo que han dicho. Quiero saberlo y conocer todas las acusaciones.

—Pues las pruebas principales las han dado los médicos; y todos la acusan, a excepción de Martin Poyser…, el pobre Martin. Todos los asistentes se compadecían de él, y cuando lo vieron aparecer resonó entre la multitud un rumor semejante a un sollozo. Lo peor fue cuando le ordenaron mirar a la acusada. Eso fue muy cruel para el desgraciado, mucho. Ten en cuenta, Adam, que el pobre hombre siente lo ocurrido tanto como tú mismo. Es preciso que ayudes a Martin y que muestres algún valor. Ahora bebe un poco de vino y procura portarte como un hombre.

Barde había pronunciado las palabras más apropiadas. Adam tomó el vaso obedientemente y bebió un poco.

—Dígame qué aspecto tenía ella —rogó.

—Asustada, muy asustada, cuando entró en la sala. La pobrecilla vio por vez primera a la multitud y a los jueces. Entre el público hay numerosas mujeres estúpidas, con galas y dijes en manos y brazos, con trajes elegantes y la cabeza cubierta de plumas, sentadas al lado del juez. Cualquiera podría creer que se han vestido así para avisar a los hombres de la conveniencia de no relacionarse nunca más con ninguna mujer. Miraban sin cesar, de un lado a otro, y hablaban en voz baja entre sí. Pero la acusada se quedó como una imagen pálida, mirando sus manos y sin que al parecer oyese ni viese nada. Estaba blanca como el papel, y no contestó cuando le preguntaron si se confesaba culpable o no; en vista de ello decidieron juzgarla como no culpable. Pero al oír el nombre de su tío se estremeció. Luego, cuando le ordenaron que la mirase, ella inclinó la cabeza y ocultó el rostro entre las manos. Al pobre hombre le temblaba la voz y le era muy difícil hablar. Los miembros del tribunal que, generalmente, son duros como clavos, lo trataron lo mejor que pudieron. El señor Irwine se puso a su lado y salió con él de la sala. ¡Ah, qué grande es para un hombre poder apoyar a un vecino y a un amigo y sostenerle en un caso tan terrible como ése!

—¡Dios le bendiga y a usted también, señor Massey! —dijo Adam en voz baja y apoyando la mano en el brazo del maestro.

—Sí. El párroco es un hombre excelente. Tiene muy buen sentido y no dice más de lo necesario. No es de esos que creen que pueden consolar a una persona charlando con ella, ni le dan a entender que conocen mejor que ella misma el disgusto que la agobia. En mis tiempos he tratado a personas así, en el sur, cuando yo mismo me hallaba en una situación desagradable. El señor Irwine también es testigo de la defensa, hablará de las buenas costumbres de la acusada.

—Pero ¿y las pruebas? ¿Son muy comprometedoras para ella? ¿Qué le parece, señor Massey? Dígame la verdad.

—Sí, hijo mío, sí. Vale más decir la verdad cuanto antes, porque al fin y al cabo acabarías conociéndola. El testimonio de los médicos es muy grave para ella, mucho. Ella, en cambio, sigue negando que haya tenido un hijo. Esas estúpidas mujeres no comprenden la inutilidad de negar lo que está probado. Estoy seguro de que esta táctica la perjudicará a los ojos del jurado, y, si el veredicto le es adverso, el tribunal se sentirá menos inclinado a la clemencia. Pero el señor Irwine hará cuanto pueda; de eso podemos estar

seguros, Adam.

—¿De modo que en la sala del tribunal nadie la apoya, nadie parece deseoso de favorecerla?

—A su lado se sienta el capellán de la cárcel, pero es hombre con cara de hurón y muy distinto del buen señor Irwine. Me han dicho que los capellanes de la cárcel son siempre lo peor del clero.

—Se comprende que así sea —dijo Adam con amargura. Luego se puso en pie y miró con fijeza hacia la ventana, como si examinase una nueva idea.

—Señor Massey —dijo por fin separándose el cabello de la frente—, le acompañaré al tribunal. Sería una cobardía por mi parte no ir. Yo la apoyaré cuanto pueda, a pesar de las mentiras que ha declarado. No deberían condenar a esa pobre niña y sus parientes no habrían de abandonar a una persona de su propia sangre. Todo el mundo solicita la misericordia de Dios y nosotros mismos no la ejercemos. Yo, en otro tiempo, era bastante duro con los demás, pero ya no volveré a obrar así. Le acompañaré, señor Massey, iré con usted.

Era tan decidido el tono de Adam que Barde comprendió la inutilidad de contrariarle, aunque lo hubiera deseado. Por consiguiente, se limitó a contestar:

—En tal caso, Adam, come y bebe un poco más. Hazlo por mí. Mira, yo también comeré para hacerte compañía.

Impulsado ya por una resolución, Adam tomó un poco de pan y bebió un vaso de vino. Estaba desencajado, sin afeitar, pero más animado y se parecía un poco al Adam de otros tiempos.

XLIII

El veredicto

La sala que aquel día se utilizó para celebrar el juicio era una estancia enorme, en la actualidad destruida por un incendio. La luz del mediodía, que caía sobre aquella numerosa congregación de cabezas humanas, penetraba a través de una fila de ventanas altas, de estilo gótico y provistas de cristales de colores. En el extremo más lejano se veían unas oxidadas armaduras y bajo el amplio arco de la gran ventana, en cuyo centro se alzaba una columna, colgaba una cortina de tapicería antigua, en la que se divisaban unas tristes figuras que más parecían un sueño borroso de tiempos pasados. Se trataba de un lugar que, durante el resto del año, parecía contener los vagos recuerdos de reyes antiguos, desgraciados, destronados y encerrados en una prisión. Pero aquel día habían huido todas aquellas sombras y ninguno de los que se hallaban en la enorme sala sentía la presencia de un dolor imaginario, sino de otro muy real que atravesaba los corazones generosos.

Pero aun ese dolor pareció leve cuando la alta figura de Adam Bede se mostró junto al banquillo de la acusada. A la viva luz que reinaba en la sala y entre los rostros flacos y afeitados de los demás hombres, las huellas del sufrimiento que se advertían en su semblante llamaron la atención incluso del señor Irwine, que ya lo había visto a la escasa luz de la habitación que ocupaba. Y los vecinos de Hayslope, que estaban presentes y que, en su ancianidad, referirían la historia de Hetty Sorrel al amor de la lumbre, jamás olvidaron mencionar cuánto se emocionaron al ver al pobre Adam Bede, cuya alta cabeza sobresalía por encima de todo el mundo, en el momento que fue a sentarse al lado de la joven.

Pero ésta no le vio. Se hallaba en la misma posición descrita por Barde Massey, con las manos cruzadas y los ojos fijos en ellas. En los primeros instantes Adam no se atrevió a mirarla; mas, por último, cuando la atención de la sala se fijó en los detalles propios del juicio, volvió resueltamente el rostro hacia ella.

¿Por qué le habían dicho que estaba muy cambiada? En el cadáver de la persona que amamos vemos el parecido, que entonces es más acentuado, por el hecho de que antes vivía y ahora ya no existe. De nuevo vio Adam el dulce rostro y el hermoso cuello, los delicados rizos, las largas y negras pestañas, las redondas mejillas y los maravillosos labios; desde luego estaba pálida y flaca, pero seguía siendo la misma Hetty de siempre. A otros quizás les parecería que el demonio la había transformado con una sola de sus centelleantes miradas, arrugando el alma femenina que la animaba y dejándole sólo una dura y desesperada obstinación. Pero Adam vio que aquella acusada, pálida y desencajada, era la misma Hetty que le sonrió en el jardín, bajo los manzanos; vio el cadáver de Hetty que, al principio, temió mirar, y del cual luego ya no podía apartar los ojos.

Pero entonces oyó algo que le obligó a escuchar e hizo menos absorbente su contemplación. En el lugar destinado a los testigos había una mujer de edad mediana, que hablaba con voz clara y firme, y dijo:

—Me llamo Sarah Stone. Soy viuda y tengo una pequeña tienda en la que vendo tabaco, rapé y té, en el callejón de la Iglesia de Stoniton. La acusada es la misma joven que, con aspecto de cansada y enferma, y con un cesto colgado del brazo, me pidió alojamiento en mi casa un sábado por la tarde o, mejor dicho, el 27 de febrero. Tomó mi casa por una posada, a causa de un cartel que tengo colgado sobre la puerta. Pero cuando le dije que no admitía huéspedes, la acusada empezó a llorar y dijo que estaba muy fatigada para ir a otra parte, y que sólo deseaba una cama para pasar la noche. Su hermosura y aspecto respetable, así como la situación desagradable en que parecía hallarse, me emocionaron y no me atreví a despedirla. La hice sentar, le di té y le pregunté adonde iba y dónde estaban sus familiares. Ella contestó que volvía a su casa, que sus parientes eran granjeros y que aún le faltaba recorrer una distancia considerable para llegar a su

lado; añadió que había hecho un largo viaje que le costó más de lo que se figuraba, de modo que le quedaba ya muy poco dinero y temía ir a donde le hiciesen pagar una cantidad importante. Se había visto obligada a vender la mayor parte de las cosas que llevaba en el cesto, pero estaba dispuesta a darme un chelín por la cama. Me pareció que no había ninguna razón para oponerme a complacer a la joven. Sólo tengo un dormitorio, pero hay en él dos camas, y así, le dije que podía quedarse conmigo. Me figuré que había sido engañada y se hallaba en situación comprometida, pero puesto que se dirigía a casa de sus parientes, sería una buena obra protegerla de nuevas contrariedades.

La testigo añadió que aquella noche la acusada dio a luz a una criatura, e identificó la ropa que ella misma proporcionó y gracias a la cual vistió al recién nacido.

—Es la misma ropa. La hice yo y la tenía guardada desde que nació mi último hijo. Favorecí cuanto pude a la madre y al niño, y no me fue posible dejar de interesarme por ellos. No llamé al médico porque, al parecer, no era necesario. Al día siguiente rogué a la madre que me indicase el nombre de sus parientes y me dijera dónde vivían, con objeto de escribirles. Ella me contestó que se proponía hacerlo ella misma, pero no aquel día. Y a pesar de cuanto le dije en contra, aquella misma tarde se levantó y vistió. Dijo que se sentía fuerte y demostró un valor sorprendente. Decidí ir a la iglesia para hablar con nuestro ministro. Salí de casa hacia las ocho y media. Para marcharme no utilicé la puerta de la tienda, sino otra que hay en la parte posterior de la casa y que da a un estrecho callejón. Sólo dispongo de la planta baja, y tanto la cocina como el dormitorio dan a dicho callejón. Dejé a la acusada en la cocina, sentada junto al fuego, y con el niño en la falda. No había llorado ni parecía desalentada como la noche anterior. Observé sin embargo una mirada rara en sus ojos, y al atardecer noté que tenía las mejillas muy rojas. Temí que tuviese fiebre y me propuse llamar a una amiga mía, mujer muy experimentada, para que la viese. La noche era muy oscura y, al salir, no cerré la puerta, porque en realidad no tiene cerradura, sino sólo una aldaba en la parte interior, de modo que cuando no hay nadie en la casa tengo la costumbre de salir por la puerta de la tienda. Pero me pareció que no había peligro de dejar la puerta abierta durante mi corta ausencia. Me entretuve más de lo que quería, pues tuve que esperar que mi amiga pudiese acompañarme. Había pasado ya una hora y media desde que salí, y cuando llegamos a casa vi la bujía encendida, como antes, pero la acusada y el niño habían desaparecido. Como es natural, yo me asusté y me enojé al notar su ausencia. No di parte, sin embargo, porque no creí que quisiera hacer nada malo y además me constaba que llevaba en el bolsillo el dinero necesario para comprar comida y obtener albergue. No quería que la persiguiese la policía, pues la joven tenía el derecho de marcharse de mi casa si le parecía bien.

Tal declaración produjo un efecto eléctrico en Adam y le dio nuevas fuerzas. Hetty no podía ser culpable del crimen; sin duda amaba a su hijo de todo corazón, ya que, de lo contrario, no se lo habría llevado, pues podía haberlo dejado en aquella casa. La criatura murió de muerte natural y ella no hizo más que ocultarla. Los niños recién nacidos mueren con facilidad, de modo que lo más probable era que existiesen sospechas, aunque ninguna prueba de culpabilidad. Su mente estaba ocupada por numerosos argumentos contrarios a tales sospechas, y por eso no pudo atender a las preguntas que hizo el abogado defensor de Hetty, que, sin éxito, trataba de demostrar que la acusada había demostrado algún sentimiento maternal con respecto a su hijo. Mientras se interrogaba a aquella testigo, Hetty continuó tan inmóvil como siempre, sin que, al parecer, se enterase de lo que ocurría; pero la voz del testigo siguiente hizo vibrar en ella una cuerda que aún era sensible; se sobresaltó visiblemente y le dirigió una mirada de temor, pero en el acto volvió la cabeza y miró a sus manos como antes. Aquel testigo era un hombre, un rudo campesino, que dijo:

—Me llamo John Olding, soy labrador y vivo en
Tedd’s
Hole, a tres kilómetros de Stoniton. El lunes hizo ocho días; a cosa de la una de la tarde, me dirigía al soto de Hetton y a quinientos metros de distancia vi a la acusada, que llevaba una capa roja, sentada bajo un almiar y no lejos del portillo. Se puso en pie al verme, como si quisiera alejarse, pero como se hallaba junto a un sendero público, entre los campos, nada de particular tenía que estuviese allí, aunque me fijé en ella por su palidez y por su aspecto de temor. De no ser por el buen traje que llevaba, la habría tomado por una mendiga. Me pareció que no estaba en sus cabales, pero me dije que eso no importaba. Me quedé mirándola para ver si volvía, pero ella continuó andando hasta perderse de vista. Tuve que ir al otro lado del soto con objeto de examinar unas estacas. En el soto hay un camino que lo atraviesa, pero a derecha y a izquierda son numerosos los pasos donde se ha cortado algún árbol. Yo no seguí el camino en línea recta, sino que me volví al llegar a la mitad y tomé un atajo en dirección al lugar adonde quería dirigirme. Apenas hube dado unos pasos, cuando oí un grito extraño. Me dije que no pertenecía a ninguno de los animales que conozco, mas no creí necesario detenerme para examinar la causa. Luego volví a oírlo y me pareció tan extraordinario en aquel lugar, que me detuve para ver quién gritaba de ese modo. Incluso pensé que si se

trataba de un animal raro podría venderlo bien. Me costó mucho averiguar de dónde procedía y empecé a mirar por entre las matas. Luego me pareció que aquel extraño animal estaba en el suelo. Miré por entre unas ramas caídas, mas no pude encontrar nada y, por fin, el grito dejó de oírse. Tuve que renunciar a descubrir la causa y continué dedicado a mis asuntos. Pero cuando volví al mismo sitio, en mi camino de regreso, cosa de una hora más tarde, dejé en el suelo unas estacas que llevaba a cuestas y empecé a registrar otra vez. Precisamente cuando me inclinaba para dejar las estacas en el suelo, vi a muy corta distancia de mí una cosa blanca y de forma rara. Me arrodillé y fui a recogerlo, y entonces me di cuenta de que era la mano de un niño.

Estas palabras hicieron que todos se estremecieran. Hetty temblaba visiblemente y por vez primera parecía prestar atención a lo que decía un testigo.

—Había allí una gran cantidad de leña sobre un pequeño hueco y la mano sobresalía por entre la madera. Sin embargo, un agujero me permitió ver la cabeza de una criatura. Me apresuré a quitar todos aquellos estorbos y saqué al niño. Observé que iba bien vestido, pero su cuerpecito estaba frío y me figuré que había muerto. Salí corriendo del bosque y fui a mi casa a mostrar la criatura a mi mujer. Ella me dijo que había muerto y que lo mejor sería llevar el cadáver a la parroquia y avisar a la policía. Yo dije: «Apostaría cualquier cosa a que esta criatura pertenece a la joven que encontré cuando iba al soto». Ella se había alejado y desaparecido a lo lejos. Y yo llevé el cadáver a la parroquia de Hetton, lo comuniqué a la policía y luego al juez Hardy. Hecho esto fuimos en busca de la joven, hasta que anocheció, y como no la encontramos, dimos aviso a Stoniton para que pudiesen detenerla. A la mañana siguiente se me presentó un policía para que le acompañase al lugar en que hallé el cadáver. Cuando llegamos allí vimos a la acusada sentada junto al matorral, no lejos del lugar en que dejó a la criatura.

Se echó a llorar al vernos, pero no se movió. En el regazo tenía un gran trozo de pan.

Mientras hablaba aquel testigo, Adam profirió un leve gemido de desesperación. Había ocultado el rostro en el brazo, que apoyaba en la mesa que tema delante. Aquel era el momento culminante de su sufrimiento. Hetty era culpable, sin duda alguna y, en silencio, el joven suplicaba el auxilio de Dios. No oyó más de aquella declaración y ni siquiera se dio cuenta de cuando el presidente declaró que ya no había más testigos de cargo, y no notó tampoco que el señor Irwine empezaba su declaración, dando cuenta al tribunal de la excelente conducta de Hetty en su propia parroquia y de las costumbres virtuosas en que se había criado. Esta declaración no tendría ninguna influencia en el veredicto, pero él la hizo para contribuir a la petición de clemencia, que el propio abogado defensor habría hecho de habérsele permitido hablar en beneficio de la acusada, favor no concedido a los criminales en aquellos tiempos de severidad.

Por fin, Adam levantó la cabeza al advertir un gran movimiento a su alrededor. El juez había dirigido la palabra al jurado que, en aquel momento, se retiraba a deliberar. No estaba ya lejos el instante decisivo. Adam sintió tal horror que no pudo mirar a Hetty, quien volvió a sumirse en su indiferencia y en su dureza habituales. Todo el mundo la miraba, pero ella parecía no darse cuenta de nada.

Durante aquel intervalo hubo en la sala un rumor compuesto de roces, murmullos y leves zumbidos. Ya no había necesidad de prestar atención y todo el mundo sentía el deseo de expresar en voz baja alguna opinión más o menos ofensiva. Adam se quedó mirando pero sin ver siquiera los objetos que tenía delante. Mientras tanto, los miembros del tribunal hablaban en tono de indiferencia y el señor Irwine lo hacía en voz baja y vehemente con el juez. Adam no vio cómo el rector volvía a sentarse muy agitado y meneaba tristemente la cabeza cuando alguien le susurraba algo al oído. Los sentimientos de Adam eran demasiado intensos para fijarse en lo que ocurría a su alrededor.

Transcurrió un cuarto de hora escaso, antes de que el golpe que avisaba que el jurado había llegado a un acuerdo diera a entender a todo el mundo la obligación de guardar silencio. Este era absoluto mientras se pronunciaban los nombres de los jurados y se obligaba a la acusada a levantar la mano. Luego se preguntó al jurado cuál era su veredicto.

—¡Culpable!

Era precisamente lo que todo el mundo esperaba, pero se oyó un suspiro general al notar que no se solicitaba la clemencia del tribunal. La acusada no gozaba de la simpatía de la audiencia, porque lo horrible de su crimen quedaba acentuado por su dura inmovilidad y su obstinado silencio. Ni siquiera el veredicto, según creyeron los observadores lejanos, fue bastante para sacarla de su apatía, aunque los que estaban cerca de ella pudieron observar que temblaba de pies a cabeza.

Volvió el silencio cuando el juez se cubrió con su toga negra y apareció a su espalda el capellán revestido de sus hábitos eclesiásticos. Luego, antes de que el ujier tuviese tiempo de recomendar silencio, éste se hizo más profundo. El presidente dijo entonces:

—Hester Sorrel…

El rostro de Hetty se cubrió de rubor, pero luego volvió a ponerse pálida al mirar al juez, y se quedó con los ojos muy abiertos y fijos, como si estuviese petrificada por el miedo. A Adam, que no volvió el rostro hacia ella, le pareció que los separaba un abismo insondable. Pero al oír las palabras «… para ser colgada por el cuello hasta que sobrevenga la muerte», en la sala resonó un grito agudo. Era Hetty. Adam dio un salto y extendió los brazos hacia ella, pero la distancia que los separaba era demasiado grande y la joven cayó desmayada y se la llevaron fuera de la sala.

XLIV

El regreso de Arthur

Cuando Arthur Donnithorne desembarcó en Liverpool y leyó la carta de su tía Lydia, anunciándole con breves palabras la muerte de su abuelo, su primera exclamación fue:

—¡Pobre abuelo! ¡Ojalá hubiese estado a su lado en el momento de su muerte! Quizás deseó algo que ahora no sabré nunca. El pobre ha tenido una muerte muy triste.

Es imposible decir que su dolor fuera más profundo de lo que dan a entender esas palabras. Mientras la silla de posta lo llevaba rápidamente hacia la mansión de la que, en adelante, sería señor, trataba de recordar todo aquello que pudiese demostrar cierto respeto por los deseos de su abuelo, siempre y cuando no estuviese en contradicción con los suyos propios acerca del bien que pensaba realizar en pro de la propiedad y de los arrendatarios. Había llegado la hora de empezar su verdadera vida; ahora tendría la oportunidad de realizar sus proyectos y se beneficiaría de ello. Demostraría a los habitantes de Loamshire lo que era un noble propietario rural y no habría cambiado ese destino por cualquier otra suerte bajo el sol. Se veía ya cabalgando por las montañas, en los hermosos días del otoño, examinando sus planes favoritos de drenaje y de cercado; luego, admirado como el mejor jinete en el mejor caballo durante las cacerías; juzgado favorablemente en los días de mercado y disfrutando de la fama de señor excelente; pronunciando discursos en las comidas que se dan en tiempo de elecciones, y demostrando grandes conocimientos agrícolas; protector de cualquier trabajo útil, severo censor de los arrendatarios negligentes y buen compañero a quien todos tendrían la mayor simpatía. Vio alegres rostros que le saludarían en todas partes y no dudó de que las familias vecinas sostendrían con él las mejores relaciones del mundo. Los Irwine cenarían con él todas las semanas y tendrían su propio coche para hacer el trayecto, pues Arthur encontraría un modo delicado de proporcionárselo; y, puesto que disponía del curato de Hayslope, obligaría al vicario a aceptar doscientas libras más al año. En cuantos a su tía, gozaría de todas las comodidades posibles, y seguiría viviendo en el cazadero, si así lo deseaba, a pesar de sus costumbres de solterona, por lo menos hasta que él se hubiese casado. Eso, sin embargo, estaba aún borroso en el cuadro de su futuro, porque Arthur no había encontrado a la mujer que representaría el papel de digna compañera del mejor caballero rural de Inglaterra.

Éstas eran las ideas principales de Arthur, condensadas en algunas frases que, en realidad, no son sino la lista de las escenas de un gran panorama lleno de color, de detalles y de vida. Los felices rostros que Arthur veía y que le saludaban no eran pálidas abstracciones, sino caras sonrosadas, verdaderas y muy familiares para él: la de Martin Poyser estaba entre ellas y también divisó las de toda la familia de éste.

¿También la de Hetty?

Sí. Porque Arthur se creía en paz con ella, si bien no estaba tan satisfecho con respecto a lo que había ocurrido unos meses antes, y hasta sentía un calor especial en las orejas cada vez que recordaba la escena con Adam; pero, en cambio, estaba tranquilo con respecto al presente. El señor Irwine, con quien se había carteado regularmente, le había dado cuenta de las noticias referentes a los lugares y a las personas, y le había comunicado, tres meses atrás, que Adam Bede no se casaría con Mary Burge, como primero se había imaginado, sino con Hetty Sorrel. Tanto Martin Poyser como el mismo Adam habían hablado de eso con el señor Irwine, y le dijeron que el joven estaba enamorado de Hetty desde dos años atrás, y que ambos jóvenes se habían puesto de acuerdo para casarse en marzo. Aquel robusto Adam era más sensible de lo que el rector se imaginaba. Se trataba de unos amores idílicos, y si esto no le hubiese ocupado demasiado espacio en su carta, le habría gustado describir a Arthur la timidez y las sencillas y vigorosas palabras con

que el excelente muchacho le comunicó su secreto. Y le constaba que Arthur recibiría con gusto la noticia de que Adam iba a ser muy feliz.

Sí, realmente le pareció a Arthur que no había bastante aire en la estancia para satisfacer su renovada vida en cuanto leyó este pasaje de la carta. Abrió las ventanas de par en par y luego salió a tomar el aire de diciembre, saludando a todos cuantos conocidos vio, con tanta alegría como si acabase de recibir noticias de otra victoria de Nelson. Por vez primera desde su llegada a Windsor se sentía totalmente alegre. La carga que pesara sobre sus hombros había desaparecido y el temor ya no existía. Se dijo que ahora nada le impediría olvidar sus amargos sentimientos con respecto a Adam. Podía ya ofrecerle su mano y rogarle que volviesen a ser amigos, a pesar de aquel recuerdo penoso que aún hacía arder sus orejas. Había sido derribado y por eso se vio obligado a mentir. Esas cosas siempre dejan una cicatriz, por mucho que se quiera evitar. Pero si Adam se mostraba como en otros tiempos, Arthur deseaba corresponder con iguales sentimientos y haría lo posible para que el joven participase en sus negocios y en su futuro, como siempre deseó antes de aquel maldito encuentro del mes de agosto. Pero no; aún haría más por Adam de lo que hubiese hecho antes de ocurrir aquella escena desagradable. El marido de Hetty tendría sobre él derechos especiales y la misma Hetty vería que todos los dolores que pudo sufrir en el pasado por su culpa estaban más que compensados; aunque realmente ella no había debido de quererle mucho, puesto que pudo resolverse a ser esposa de Adam.

Ya se ve, pues, cuál era el cuadro que Arthur se imaginaba de Adam y de Hetty en el panorama de su porvenir. Corría entonces el mes de marzo y pronto se casarían los dos jóvenes. Quizás se habrían casado ya. Y ahora Arthur estaba en situación de hacer mucho por ellos. ¡Dulce y querida Hetty! Sin duda la pequeñuela no llegó a quererle tanto como él la quiso, porque aún ahora se sentía atraído por ella, de manera que temía verla, y también es preciso confesar que había hecho muy poco caso a las demás mujeres desde que se despidió de la joven. Aquella pequeña figura que se dirigía hacia él en la alameda, aquellos ojos negros de largas pestañas y de infantil expresión, y los hermosos labios que se acercaban a los suyos para besarle…, esta imagen no se había debilitado en su memoria a pesar del tiempo trascurrido. Y no había duda de que seguiría siendo tan hermosa como siempre. Era imposible imaginarse que la vería muy pronto, pero estaba seguro de que en cuanto eso sucediera no podría dejar de temblar. Claro que no estaba enamorado de Hetty; había deseado con toda su alma, durante meses enteros, que ésta se casara con Adam, y nada contribuía más a su propia felicidad, en esos momentos, que la idea de esa boda. Era el exagerado efecto de la imaginación el que hacía latir apresuradamente su corazón cuando pensaba en ella. En cuanto la viese convertida en esposa de Adam, ocupada en los trabajos prosaicos de su nuevo hogar, tal vez llegaría a extrañarse de sus anteriores sentimientos. Gracias a Dios, todo se había arreglado muy bien. Ya podía dedicarse por entero a sus asuntos; no había por qué temer que reincidiese en sus tonterías.

¡Qué agradable resultaba el chasquido del látigo del postillón, así como la sensación de verse transportado con tanta rapidez a través de los paisajes ingleses, tan semejantes a los de su propio pueblo, aunque quizás no tan encantadores! Atravesó el mercado de una ciudad muy semejante a Treddleston, en la cual las armas del señor del lugar se veían en el cartel de la posada principal; luego, más campos y matorrales, cuya vecindad a una población como aquélla indicaba sobradamente que tenías que pagar un arrendamiento muy elevado; después las tierras empezaron a ofrecer un aspecto más pobre, los bosques fueron más frecuentes y, de vez en cuando, se veía alguna casa blanca o roja situada en una prominencia moderada, lo que permitía contemplar sus parapetos y chimeneas por entre las densas masas de olmos y robles, enrojecidas ahora por las flores tempranas. Y luego aparecía el pueblo, la pequeña iglesia con su tejado rojo, de aspecto humilde incluso, entre las casas de madera, y los antiguos cementerios verdes, rodeados de plantas espinosas. En aquellos lugares no había nada brillante y lozano, a excepción de los niños, que abrían los ojos de par en par al contemplar el paso de la rápida silla de posta. Tampoco había nada ruidoso, a excepción de los perros ladradores, pertenecientes a una raza extraña. ¡Cuánto más hermoso era el pueblo de Hayslope! Y estaba dispuesto a no dejarlo nunca tan abandonado como aquel que cruzaba en ese momento. Realizaría grandes obras de reparación en las casas y en los edificios de las granjas, de modo que los que viajasen en sillas de posta por el camino de Rosseter no tendrían más remedio que admirar el pueblo. Adam Bede dirigiría todas aquellas reparaciones, porque ahora ya tenía una participación en los negocios de Burge, y, si era necesario, Arthur metería algún dinero en la empresa y hasta compraría la parte del viejo dentro de uno o dos años. Lo ocurrido durante el último verano fue una gran falta en la vida de Arthur, pero se proponía compensarla con su conducta futura. Muchos, en su lugar, habrían sentido el deseo de vengarse de Adam, pero él no pensaba así, pues estaba dispuesto a no recordar pequeñeces semejantes, ya que había sido él quien tuvo la culpa de todo; y aunque Adam se mostró brutal y violento, debía reconocerse que se vio en un doloroso dilema, porque el pobre muchacho estaba enamorado

y fue provocado; no, Arthur no sentía ningún odio contra nadie; era feliz y procuraría la dicha de todos los que dependieran de él.

¡Ah! Por fin se le apareció su querido pueblo de Hayslope, durmiendo en la montaña, como lugar apacible que era, a la luz de las últimas horas de la tarde; y frente a las grandes montañas de Binton divisó la negrura de los bosques que cubrían las laderas y, por último, la pálida fachada de la abadía, que asomaba por entre los robles del cazadero como si desease presenciar su regreso.

«¡Pobre abuelo! Ya ha muerto. También, en otro tiempo, fue joven y heredó la propiedad, y debió de hacer sus planes. ¡Estas son las vueltas que da el mundo! La pobre tía Lydia debe de estar muy desconsolada, pero es preciso mimarla del mismo modo que ella mima al gordo Fido».

En el cazadero se esperaba con ansiedad el ruido de las ruedas de la silla de posta de Arthur, porque era viernes y el entierro ya se había aplazado dos días. Antes de que se detuviera en la arena del patio, todos los criados de la casa se habían congregado para recibirle y darle, una grave bienvenida, según correspondía a la casa en la que había un muerto. Un mes antes quizás les habría sido muy difícil mostrar su tristeza cuando el señor Arthur fuera a tomar posesión de su herencia, pero los corazones de los criados estaban aquel día muy apesadumbrados por otra causa independiente de la muerte del anciano caballero, y más de uno habría deseado estar a más de treinta kilómetros de distancia, como le ocurría ahora al señor Craig, sabiendo lo que sería de Hetty Sorrel, la linda Hetty Sorrel, a quien todos estaban acostumbrados a ver semanalmente. Todos ellos sentían, sin embargo, la parcialidad de los criados que están muy a gusto en su empleo, y no estaban inclinados a demostrar la severa indignación de los arrendatarios, sino por el contrario a excusar a su joven señor; sin embargo, los criados principales, que durante muchos años habían mantenido relaciones de buena amistad con los Poyser, no podían dejar de decirse que la muy esperada llegada del joven caballero para hacerse cargo de la propiedad carecía del aspecto agradable esperado.

A Arthur no le pareció sorprendente la expresión seria de sus servidores. Él mismo se sentía muy conmovido al verlos de nuevo, diciéndose que en aquel momento se presentaba a ellos con un nuevo carácter. Era aquella una emoción más agradable que penosa, y que quizás es la más deliciosa para un hombre bondadoso y consciente del poder que tiene ya para satisfacer sus buenos sentimientos. Y su corazón se dilató de un modo agradable al preguntar:

—¡Hola, Mills! ¿Cómo está mi tía?

Pero el señor Bygate, el abogado, que no se había movido de la casa desde que ocurrió el fallecimiento, se adelantó para saludarle con la mayor deferencia y contestar a sus preguntas. Arthur entró con él en la biblioteca, donde le esperaba su tía Lydia. Ésta era la única persona de la casa que no sabía una palabra con respecto a Hetty. Su dolor, como hija soltera, no le dejaba pensar en nada más que en las disposiciones del entierro y en su propia suerte. Y, según suelen hacer las mujeres, lloraba por el padre que había dado importancia a su propia vida y mucho más al decirse que, con toda seguridad, no le lloraba nadie más.

Arthur la besó con mayor ternura que en ninguna otra ocasión de su vida.

—Querida tía —le dijo con cariño mientras le estrechaba la mano—; tu pena es la más legítima de todas, pero has de procurar darme ocasión de mitigártela en lo que sea posible.

—Fue tan repentino y tan horrible, Arthur… —dijo la señorita Lydia.

Y empezó a relatar a su sobrino los detalles de la muerte. Este, en cuanto hizo su tía una pausa, exclamó:

—Ahora, tía, te voy a dejar durante un cuarto de hora, pues tengo que ir a mi habitación. Luego volveré. Supongo, Mills —añadió dirigiéndose al mayordomo, que se hallaba en la entrada del vestíbulo y parecía algo inquieto—, que ya tendré preparada mi habitación.

—Sí, señor, y hay allí varias cartas para usted. Las encontrará en el escritorio de su tocador.

Al entrar en la pequeña antecámara que se conocía con el nombre de «tocador», pero que, en realidad, Arthur usaba tan sólo para descansar y para escribir, dirigió una mirada al escritorio y vio que contenía varías cartas y algunos paquetes. Pero como se hallaba cubierto de polvo a consecuencia de su largo y precipitado viaje, deseaba lavarse y cambiarse de ropa antes de leer las cartas. Pym se ocupó de prepararlo todo, y Arthur, ya refrescado, como si estuviese dispuesto a empezar un nuevo día, volvió al tocador para abrir la correspondencia.

La carta que se hallaba encima de las demás tenía el sobrescrito vuelto hacia arriba. Era de mano del señor Irwine, como Arthur vio enseguida, y observó, además, que había una frase añadida: «Para ser entregada en cuanto llegue». Arthur se apresuró a romper el sello.

He aquí lo que le comunicaba el buen sacerdote:

Le envío esta carta con el deseo de que se la entreguen inmediatamente después de su llegada. Tal vez entonces estaré en Stoniton, a donde me llama el deber más penoso de toda mi vida, y conviene que sepa,

sin demora, cuanto tengo que decirle.

No trataré de añadir una sola palabra de reproche al castigo que le ha correspondido. Todo lo que pudiese escribir en este momento carecería de significado al lado de lo que expresa la verdad sencilla.

Hetty Sorrel está en la cárcel y el viernes será juzgada por el crimen de infanticidio…

Arthur no leyó más. Se puso en pie de un salto y durante un minuto tembló de pies a cabeza con violencia, como si la vida se le escapase de su cuerpo a sacudidas; luego salió corriendo de la estancia, sin dejar de sostener la carta, cruzó el pasillo y bajó las escaleras en dirección al vestíbulo. Mills estaba allí todavía, pero Arthur no le vio al pasar por su lado como un hombre perseguido. El mayordomo le siguió con toda la prisa que le permitieron sus años, pues adivinó adonde se dirigía su señor.

Cuando el mayordomo llegó a la cuadra, vio que estaban ensillando un caballo y que Arthur se esforzaba en leer el resto de la carta. En cuanto le entregaron el caballo se la guardó en el bolsillo y, al ver el rostro ansioso de Mills, exclamó agitado:

—Dígales que me he marchado a… Stoniton.

Y, dicho esto, saltó sobre la silla y se alejó a todo galope.

XLV

En la cárcel

Poco antes de la puesta del sol de aquella tarde, un caballero de cierta edad estaba apoyado de espaldas contra la puertecilla de la cárcel de Stoniton, mientras dirigía algunas palabras finales al capellán, mirando al suelo y acariciándose la barba con aire pensativo. De pronto le obligó a levantar la mirada una voz clara y femenina que preguntó:

—¿Me permiten entrar en la cárcel?

El interpelado volvió la cabeza y miró con atención a la que acababa de hablar, aunque no le contestó.

—Yo la he visto antes de ahora —dijo por fin—. ¿Se acuerda del día en que fue a predicar al parque de Hayslope, en Loamshire?

—Sí, señor. ¿Es usted el caballero que estuvo escuchando montado a caballo?

—Sí. ¿Para qué quiere entrar en la cárcel?

—Quisiera ver a Hetty Sorrel, a esa joven que ha sido condenada a muerte, y, si se me permite, desearía hacerle compañía. ¿Tiene autoridad en la cárcel, señor?

—Sí. Soy magistrado y puedo lograrle el permiso de entrar. Pero ¿conoce a la acusada?

—Sí. Somos parientes. Mi tía se casó con su tío, Martin Poyser. Yo estaba en Leeds y no me enteré de esta desgracia a tiempo para venir antes. Y le ruego, señor, por el amor de nuestro Padre celestial, que me deje entrar y permanecer con ella.

—¿Y cómo sabía que había sido condenada a muerte, si acaba de llegar de Leeds?

—Después del juicio he visto a mi tío, señor. El pobre ha regresado a su casa y a la desgraciada pecadora la han olvidado todos. Por eso le ruego que obtenga el permiso para que pueda quedarme a su lado.

—¡Cómo! ¿Tendrá el valor de permanecer toda la noche en la cárcel? Además, la condenada está tan triste y silenciosa que apenas contesta cuando se le dirige la palabra.

—¡Oh, señor! Tal vez Dios querrá abrir su corazón. No nos entretengamos.

—Pues, venga —dijo el anciano caballero llamando a la puerta para entrar—. Me consta que tiene una llave para abrir los corazones.

En cuanto se halló en el patio de la cárcel, Dinah se quitó maquinalmente el gorro y el chal, por la costumbre que tenía de hacerlo cuando predicaba, rezaba o visitaba a los enfermos. Y, al entrar en la habitación del carcelero, dejó ambas prendas en una silla, casi sin fijarse en lo que hacía. No se advertía en ella ninguna agitación, sino una tranquilidad concentrada, como si aun cuando hablaba su alma estuviese entregada a la oración y reposando en un apoyo invisible.

Después de hablar al carcelero, el magistrado se volvió hacia ella y le dijo:

—El carcelero le acompañará al calabozo de la presa y le dejará allí toda la noche, si lo desea, pero no podrá tener ninguna luz encendida, porque eso es contrario al reglamento. Yo soy el coronel Townley. Si puedo ayudarle en algo, pregunte al carcelero las señas de mi domicilio y procure verme. Me intereso bastante por Hetty Sorrel, a causa de ese buen muchacho, Adam Bede. Por casualidad le vi en Hayslope la misma tarde en que le vi predicar a usted. Y hoy, en el tribunal, a pesar de su aspecto enfermo, le reconocí.

—¡Oh, señor! ¿No podría decirme algo más acerca de él? ¿Sabe dónde se aloja? Se lo pregunté a mi tío, pero el pobre estaba tan apenado que no pudo recordarlo.

—Cerca de aquí. Me enteré por medio del señor Irwine. Habita en casa de un hojalatero, en la calle que está a la derecha de la cárcel. Le acompaña un maestro de escuela. Ahora, adiós, y le deseo el mayor de los éxitos.

—Adiós, señor. Le quedo muy agradecida.

Mientras Dinah cruzaba el patio de la cárcel en compañía del carcelero, la solemne luz de la tarde parecía dar mayor altura a las paredes de la prisión, y el dulce y pálido rostro de la joven tenía más parecido con una flor blanca a causa de la negrura del fondo. El carcelero la miraba de soslayo, pero no habló, comprendiendo quizás que el sonido de su voz ruda sería discordante. Encendió una luz al entrar en el oscuro corredor que conducía al calabozo de la condenada, y en tono muy cortés, dijo:

—En la celda debe de reinar ya la oscuridad. Pero, si quiere, puedo alumbrarle un poco con mi luz.

—Muchas gracias —contestó Dinah—, quiero estar sola.

—Como guste —dijo el carcelero haciendo girar la gruesa llave en la cerradura y abriendo la puerta lo estrictamente necesario para dar paso a Dinah.

Un rayo de luz de su linterna cayó en el rincón opuesto del calabozo, donde Hetty estaba sentada sobre su jergón de paja, con el rostro casi hundido entre las rodillas. Parecía estar dormida y, sin embargo, el ruido de la cerradura habría debido despertarla.

La puerta se cerró otra vez, de modo que la única luz que hubo en el calabozo fue la del cielo crepuscular, del que se divisaba una pequeñísima parte por la alta y enrejada ventana, suficiente para distinguir los rostros humanos. Dinah se quedó inmóvil por espacio de un minuto, sin atreverse a hablar, creyendo, tal vez, que Hetty estaría dormida. Miró pues a aquel cuerpo inmóvil, con el corazón lleno de zozobra, y luego, con voz suave, exclamó:

—¡Hetty!

Esta hizo un ligero movimiento y tuvo un leve sobresalto, como si hubiese recibido una débil sacudida eléctrica; pero no levantó la mirada. Dinah volvió a hablar con voz más fuerte, movida por una intensa emoción.

—¡Hetty! Soy Dinah.

De nuevo se sobresaltó la condenada y, sin descubrir el rostro, levantó un poco la cabeza, como si quisiera escuchar.

—Hetty… Ha venido a verte Dinah.

Después de una ligera pausa, Hetty levantó la cabeza lentamente, con timidez, y luego miró a Dinah. Los dos pálidos rostros se contemplaron; uno con expresión desesperada y el otro lleno de afecto y de tristeza. Dinah, inconscientemente, abrió los brazos y exclamó:

—¿No me conoces, Hetty? ¿No te acuerdas de Dinah? ¿Te figurabas que no vendría a verte cuando eres desgraciada?

Hetty siguió contemplando a Dinah, aunque en un primer momento lo hizo como un animal que mira con gran atención y, sin embargo, continúa receloso.

—He venido para estar contigo, Hetty. No para dejarte, sino para acompañarte y para ser tu hermana hasta el último momento.

Lentamente y mientras Dinah hablaba, Hetty se levantó, dio un paso y cayó en los brazos de aquélla.

Así estuvieron un buen rato, pues ninguna de las dos sentía el impulso de separarse. Hetty, sin darse cuenta, se agarró a aquel ser que la abrazaba, mientras se sentía caer, indefensa, en un oscuro y profundo abismo. Y Dinah sintió una intensa alegría al notar aquel primer síntoma de que su amor era aceptado por la desdichada. Mientras estaban así se debilitó la luz, y cuando por fin se sentaron en el jergón de paja, sus rostros eran ya invisibles.

No cruzaron ninguna palabra; Dinah esperaba que Hetty pronunciase alguna de un modo espontáneo, pero la desventurada parecía estar sumida en la misma desesperación hosca, aunque tenía cogida una mano de Dinah y apoyaba su mejilla sobre el cuerpo de ésta. Deseaba el contacto humano, pero no por eso dejaba de continuar hundiéndose en aquel sombrío abismo.

Dinah empezó a dudar de si Hetty sabría quién estaba sentada a su lado. Temió que el sufrimiento y el miedo pudiesen haber arrebatado la razón de la pobre pecadora, pero comprendió, según dijo después, que no debía apresurar la obra de Dios; con frecuencia obramos con demasiada prisa, como si Dios no se manifestase también con nuestro silencio y no hiciese patente su amor por medio de nosotros. Dinah no sabía cuánto tiempo estuvo de aquel modo, pero oscureció más y más, hasta el punto de que sólo pudo divisar una pálida faja de luz en la pared opuesta. Todo lo demás era negro. En cambio, sentía con mayor intensidad la presencia divina, como si ella misma formase parte de ésta, porque, en efecto, la compasión divina latía en su corazón y tenía cada vez mayor deseo de salvar a aquella pobre abandonada. Por fin se sintió inclinada a hablar; quería saber si Hetty era capaz de comprender sus palabras:

—Hetty —dijo con suavidad—, ¿sabes quién está a tu lado?

—Sí —contestó ella con lentitud—. Dinah.

—¿Y te acuerdas de cuando las dos estábamos en Hall Farm y de la noche en que te dije que deberías recordarme como amiga en caso de necesidad?

—Sí —contestó Hetty—. Pero no puedes hacer nada por mí, pues me ahorcarán el lunes…, y hoy es viernes.

Mientras Hetty pronunciaba estas palabras, se apretó con más fuerza contra Dinah, temblando al mismo tiempo.

—No, Hetty, no puedo salvarte de la muerte. Pero ¿no te parece que sufres menos cuando tienes alguien a tu lado que te compadece…, a quien puedes hablar para comunicarle lo que hay en tu corazón? Sí, Hetty; te apoyas en mí y te alegras de tenerme a tu lado.

—¿No me abandonarás, Dinah? ¿Continuarás aquí hasta el último instante? —preguntó la presa.

—No te abandonaré, Hetty. Continuaré a tu lado hasta el fin; pero he de decirte que en este calabozo hay alguien más, alguien que se halla muy cerca de ti.

—¿Quién? —preguntó Hetty sobresaltada.

—Alguien que te ha acompañado durante las horas de tu pecado y de tu desgracia. Ha conocido todos tus pensamientos…, ha visto adonde ibas, dónde te sentabas, y dónde volvías a levantarte, y todo cuanto has hecho para ocultarte en la oscuridad. Y el lunes, cuando yo ya no pueda seguirte…, cuando mis brazos no te alcancen…, cuando la muerte nos haya separado, Él, que está con nosotras ahora, y que lo sabe todo, continuará también a tu lado. Y no importa que estemos vivos o muertos, porque siempre nos hallamos en presencia de Dios.

—¡Oh, Dinah! ¿No hará nadie algo por mí? ¿Me ahorcarán? Quisiera que me dejasen vivir.

—¡Pobre Hetty! La muerte te parece horrible. Comprendo que es algo espantoso. Pero si tuvieras un amigo que cuidase de ti después de la muerte…, en ese otro mundo, alguien cuyo amor es mayor que el mío…, que lo puede todo…, si Dios, nuestro Padre, fuese tu amigo y estuviese dispuesto a salvarte del pecado y del sufrimiento, de modo que nunca tuvieses ideas malas ni dolor… Si pudieses creer que Él te ama y quiere ayudarte, del mismo modo que crees que yo te quiero y deseo venir en tu ayuda, con seguridad no te parecería tan horrible morir el lunes próximo. ¿No es cierto?

—Pero yo no sé nada de eso —dijo Hetty con la mayor tristeza.

—Eso, Hetty, es porque tú le cierras tu alma, tratando de ocultar la verdad. El amor de Dios y su misericordia lo pueden todo y especialmente vencer nuestra ignorancia y debilidad y también quitarnos la carga de nuestras pasadas maldades. De todo pueden librarnos, a excepción de los pecados de los que no nos arrepintamos y que no queramos confesar. Crees en mi amor y en mi compasión hacia ti, Hetty; pero si no me hubieses permitido acercarme a ti o no me hubieras mirado o hablado, me habrías impedido ayudarte. No me habría sido posible darte a entender mi amor, ni expresarte lo que siento por ti. Por consiguiente, no te prives del amor de Dios, no continúes sumida en el pecado. Él no puede bendecirte mientras en tu alma exista la falsedad; su misericordia no podrá llegar hasta ti mientras no le abras tu corazón y digas: «He cometido esta gran maldad, ¡oh, Dios mío!, sálvame y purifícame del pecado». Mientras no lo hagas, infeliz, tu propia culpa te arrastrará a la mayor desgracia después de la muerte, como te ha sumido en ella en este mundo, pobre Hetty mía. El pecado te sume en la desesperación. Podemos gozar de la luz y del amor de Dios en cuanto renegamos del pecado. Entonces Dios entra en nuestras almas, nos enseña y nos da fuerza y tranquilidad. Arroja, pues, tu pecado, Hetty; hazlo inmediatamente; confiesa la maldad que has cometido; el pecado de que eres culpable ante Dios, que es tu Padre celestial, y así, arrodillémonos juntas, porque estamos en presencia de Dios.

Hetty obedeció la indicación de Dinah y se dejó caer de rodillas. Aún continuaban las dos con las manos unidas y hubo un largo silencio, que interrumpió Dinah diciendo:

—Hetty, ahora estamos delante de Dios, y Él espera que le digas la verdad.

De nuevo reinó el silencio y, por fin, Hetty suplicó:

—Dinah…, ayúdame… No puedo sentir lo mismo que tú…, mi corazón está endurecido…

Dinah estrechó la mano de su compañera y toda su alma se exteriorizó por medio de su voz:

—¡Jesús, salvador nuestro! Has conocido las profundidades de todas las penas; has entrado en las oscuras tinieblas donde no está Dios y has proferido el grito de los olvidados. Ven, Señor, y recoge los frutos de tu obra y de tus enseñanzas. Extiende tu mano, Tú que eres todopoderoso para salvar a los mayores pecadores, salva a esta alma perdida. Está rodeada de espesas tinieblas; lleva los grilletes de su pecado y no puede moverse para llegar hasta ti. Sólo siente su corazón endurecido y nota su absoluta indefensión. Y me ruega a mí, que soy tu débil sierva… Salvador nuestro… Te lo rogamos. Escúchanos. Atraviesa la oscuridad. Mírala con tu rostro amoroso y triste, cuya contemplación permitiste incluso a quienes te negaron; y, además, suaviza su dulce corazón. Mira, Señor. Te la traigo como antes llevaban a tu presencia a los

enfermos y a los impedidos, con objeto de que la cures. Yo la sostengo en mis brazos y la presento a ti. El temor y el temblor se han apoderado de ella, pero sólo teme el dolor y la muerte del cuerpo; infunde en ella la vida del espíritu y pon un nuevo temor en su ánimo; el del pecado. Haz que ella confiese su pecado y ruegue el perdón antes de que llegue la noche.

—¡Dinah! —sollozó Hetty rodeando con sus brazos el cuello de la joven—. Hablaré…, lo diré todo…, no ocultaré nada más…

Pero las lágrimas y los sollozos eran demasiado violentos. Dinah la levantó con suavidad y la sentó de nuevo en el jergón, situándose luego a su lado. Trascurrió bastante tiempo antes de que las convulsiones de la garganta desaparecieran, y aun entonces las dos jóvenes permanecieron un rato silenciosas, aunque cogidas de la mano.

Por fin, Hetty murmuró:

—En efecto, lo hice, Dinah… Lo enterré en el bosque…, a mi hijito…, y él lloraba… Yo le oí…, le oí llorar durante toda la noche y desde gran distancia…, y volví a causa del llanto.

Hizo una pausa y luego, con mayor apresuramiento y en tono de súplica, añadió:

—Pero yo pensé que quizás no moriría…, que alguien lo encontraría… No lo maté… No lo maté yo misma. Lo puse allá y lo cubrí, pero al volver ya no estaba. Yo era muy desgraciada, Dinah. No sabía adonde ir. Quise matarme, pero no tuve ánimos. ¡Oh! Quise arrojarme a un estanque, ¡pero no me fue posible…! Fui a Windsor… ¿No lo sabías? Fui a su encuentro, para que cuidase de mí; pero él se había marchado y luego no supe qué hacer. No me atreví a volver a casa…, no era posible, no habría tenido fuerzas para mirar a nadie, porque se habrían burlado de mí. Algunas veces pensé en ti y hasta en acudir a tu lado, porque estaba segura de que tú me acogerías y que no te avergonzarías de mí; incluso llegué a creer posible contártelo todo. Pero luego todos habrían acabado por saberlo y no me sentía con fuerzas para soportar eso. Y en parte por haber pensado en ti, volví a Stoniton; además estaba tan asustada ante la posibilidad de ir errante de un lado a otro, como una mendiga… A veces llegué a imaginarme que más valdría volver a la granja. ¡Oh, era espantoso, Dinah! Fui muy desgraciada… Deseé muchas veces no haber nacido y me dije que nunca más me gustaría contemplar los verdes campos, porque a causa de mi desgracia llegué a odiarlos con toda el alma.

Se detuvo un momento y luego prosiguió:

—Por fin llegué a Stoniton, y aquella noche tuve mucho miedo al verme tan cerca de mi casa. Luego nació mi hijito, cuando yo no lo esperaba; y se me ocurrió la idea de librarme de él y volver a mi casa. Esta idea se me ocurrió de repente, mientras estaba tendida en la cama y recobraba rápidamente las fuerzas. Deseé reanudar el camino y regresar a mi casa. No pude resignarme a la soledad y a pedir limosna para comer. Eso me dio fuerza y resolución para levantarme y vestirme. Creí que debía de abandonar a mi hijo, aunque ignoraba cómo lo haría. Me pareció que podía encontrar un estanque, y así, cuando aquella mujer salió de su casa, me sentí con fuerzas para hacer cualquier cosa. Estaba resuelta a librarme de la causa de mis desgracias y a volver a casa y no comunicar jamás la causa de mi fuga. Me puse el gorro y el chal y salí a la calle oscura, con el niño bajo mi capa; anduve deprisa hasta llegar a una calle lejana, donde vi una taberna; entré para tomar una bebida caliente y comer un poco de pan. Luego seguí andando, sin ver apenas el suelo que pisaba; luego apareció la luna y pude andar más deprisa. Abandoné el camino para meterme en los campos, pues temía que alguien me viese alumbrada por la luz de la luna. Y llegué a un pajar, donde creí poder tenderme y pasar la noche. Había en el pajar una hendidura, en la que pude arreglarme un lecho; me tendí cómodamente y el niño estaba caliente a mi lado. Sin duda debí de dormir unas horas, porque al despertar vi que era de día, aunque la luz era escasa; el niño lloraba. A poca distancia divisé un bosque…, y me dije que quizás hubiese allí un estanque o un pantano. Era tan escasa la luz reinante que creí poder ocultar el niño allí y alejarme antes de que se despertase la gente. Entonces se me ocurrió volver a casa. Aprovecharía los carros que encontrase por la carretera y llegaría junto a mis tíos; entonces les diría que había salido con objeto de buscar algún empleo, pero que no pude encontrarlo. Con toda mi alma, Dinah, deseaba verme de nuevo segura en mi casa. No sé cuáles eran mis sentimientos acerca del niño. A veces me figuraba odiarlo, y, sin embargo, su llanto resonaba sin cesar en mis oídos, y yo no me atrevía a mirar sus manitas y su cara. Registré el bosque, pero no pude encontrar ningún depósito de agua.

Hetty se estremeció, guardó silencio unos instantes y al reanudar su confesión lo hizo en voz muy baja.

—Llegué a un lugar donde había un montón de leña y entonces me senté en el tronco de un árbol para pensar lo que haría. De pronto vi un agujero debajo de un nogal, algo semejante a una pequeña tumba. Y con la rapidez del rayo se me ocurrió la idea de dejar allí al niño y ocultarlo con los trozos de leña. ¡Si supieras, Dinah, cómo lloraba! No pude acabar de ocultarlo y entonces me dije que quizás llegaría alguien, se haría cargo de él y no moriría. Y me apresuré a salir del bosque, pero era inútil que me alejase, pues oía

su llanto sin cesar. Cuando salí a los campos, me pareció que no podía seguir andando, como si alguien me retuviese a pesar de mi deseo. Luego me senté junto al pajar para ver si llegaba alguien; tenía mucha hambre y sólo me quedaba un pedazo de pan. Y no podía marcharme. Después de mucho rato, horas y horas, llegó aquel hombre; llevaba una blusa y me miró de tal manera que me asusté. Así que me apresuré a levantarme y echar a andar. Me figuré que iría al bosque y quizás encontraría al niño. Yo, mientras tanto, llegué a un pueblo bastante alejado del bosque y me sentí enferma, débil y hambrienta. Allí compré pan, pero no me atreví a quedarme en el pueblo. Seguía oyendo el llanto del niño y me pareció que los demás lo oían como yo. Por esta razón seguí andando, pero estaba muy cansada y oscurecía ya. Por fin, junto al camino, vi un henil, bastante alejado de las casas. Me dije que podría ocultarme allí, entre el heno y la paja, y que no vendría nadie. Entré y observé que el lugar estaba lleno de haces de paja y también había bastante heno. Me arreglé una cama en un rincón, donde nadie pudiese encontrarme, y estaba tan cansada y débil que me dormí. Sin embargo, poco después me despertó el llanto del niño y me figuré que aquel hombre que me vio venía a prenderme. Debí de dormir bastante tiempo, aunque ignoraba cuánto, porque, al ponerme en pie para salir del henil, no sabía si era de noche o de día. Pronto descubrí, sin embargo, que estaba amaneciendo y entonces desanduve lo andado hasta llegar al bosque. ¡No pude remediarlo, Dinah! El llanto del niño me obligó a hacerlo, y, sin embargo, estaba asustadísima. Creía que el hombre de la blusa me vería, que sabría que yo había abandonado a mi hijo, pero seguí adelante a pesar de todo. Ya no pensaba en volver a casa, pues esta idea había desaparecido de mi mente. No pensaba en nada más que en el lugar en que había dejado a mi hijo. Todavía me parece estar viendo aquel sitio. ¡Oh, Dinah! No puedo apartarlo de mi mente.

Hetty se abrazó de nuevo a Dinah y se estremeció otra vez. Hubo un largo silencio antes de que continuase diciendo:

—No encontré a nadie, pues era muy temprano y, por fin, llegué al bosque. Reconocí muy bien el camino que llevaba al nogal. Y a cada paso que daba seguía oyendo el llanto del niño. Me figuré que estaba vivo, e ignoro si eso me asustó o me alegró. No sé lo que pensaba; sólo sabía que estaba en el bosque y oía llorar a mi hijo. Ignoro lo que sentí hasta que me di cuenta de que había desaparecido. Cuando lo dejé allí me dije que tal vez lo encontraría alguien y lo salvaría de la muerte; pero, al darme cuenta de que ya no estaba, me quedé anonadada. Ni siquiera pensé en moverme; me sentía muy débil. Me veía incapaz de echar a correr y tenía la certeza de que todos los que me viesen sabrían lo que había hecho. Me quedé como una estatua, incapaz de pensar ni de hacer cosa alguna; me pareció que me quedaría allí para siempre y que nada cambiaría. Pero finalmente llegaron y se me llevaron.

Hetty guardó silencio, pero volvió a estremecerme como si aún tuviese que hacer más revelaciones. Dinah estaba tan impresionada que experimentó una imperiosa necesidad de llorar. Por fin, Hetty exclamó, igualmente entre sollozos:

—Dime, Dinah, ¿crees que Dios hará desaparecer ese llanto y aquella tumba del bosque ahora que lo he confesado todo?

—Recemos, pobre pecadora. Caigamos otra vez de rodillas y roguemos a Dios misericordioso.

XLVI

HORAS DE ANGUSTIA

El domingo por la mañana, cuando las campanas de la iglesia de Stoniton llamaban para el servicio matutino, Barde Massey regresó a la habitación de Adam, después de una corta ausencia, y dijo:

—Tienes una visita, Adam.

El joven, que se había sentado de espaldas a la puerta, se puso en pie para volverse en el acto, con el rostro sonrojado y la mirada llena de ansiedad. Estaba más flaco y más desencajado que antes, pero aquel domingo por la mañana se había lavado y afeitado.

—¿Hay noticias? —preguntó.

—Tranquilízate, muchacho —contestó Barde—. Procura calmarte. No es nada de lo que te figuras. Solamente la joven metodista que viene ahora de la cárcel. Está en la parte inferior de la escalera y desea saber si quieres recibirla, porque tiene algo que decirte sobre esa desgraciada. Me ha dicho también que no quería subir sin tu permiso. Incluso ha creído que tú saldrías para hablar con ella. Por lo común, esas mujeres predicadoras no son tan tímidas.

—Haga el favor de decirle que suba —contesto Adam.

Se quedó en pie ante la puerta, y en cuanto entró Dinah, fijando en él sus ojos grises de suave expresión, pudo notar en el acto el gran cambio que había experimentado el joven desde el día que lo vio en su propia casa. Y en la clara voz de ella se notó cierto temblor mientras le daba la mano y le decía:

—Consuélese, Adam Bede, porque el Señor no la ha olvidado.

—Dios bendiga su acción —replicó Adam—. El señor Massey me comunicó ayer que había usted ido a la cárcel.

Ninguno de los dos fue capaz de decir otra cosa y se quedaron frente a frente, guardando silencio. Y Barde Massey, que se había puesto las gafas, parecía extasiado al contemplar el rostro de Dinah. Sin embargo, fue el primero en volver en sí y dijo:

—Siéntese, joven, siéntese.

Y, al mismo tiempo, le ofreció una silla y retrocedió para sentarse en la cama.

—Gracias, amigo, pero no quiero sentarme —dijo Dinah—, porque he de volver cuanto antes. La pobrecilla me rogó que no estuviese ausente mucho rato. He venido, Adam Bede, para rogarle que consienta en ver a la pobre pecadora para despedirse de ella. Quiere pedirle perdón y vale más que vaya a verla hoy y no mañana temprano, porque entonces tendrá poco tiempo.

Adam temblaba y finalmente se dejó caer de nuevo en la silla.

—No es posible que ocurra una cosa tan horrible —dijo—. Lo aplazarán. Quizás le otorgarán el perdón. El señor Irwine me dijo que había esperanza y aseguró que yo no debía perder el ánimo.

—Estas palabras me parecen una bendición —dijo Dinah con los ojos llenos de lágrimas—. Es horrible pensar que la pobrecilla tenga que dejar tan pronto este mundo. Pero, pase lo que pase, espero que querrá ir a verla para que ella le diga las palabras que hay en su corazón. Y aunque su pobre alma está en las tinieblas y discierne muy pocas cosas más allá de la carne, ya no la domina la dureza del corazón y está contrita… Me lo ha confesado todo. Ha desaparecido el orgullo de su corazón y se apoya en mí, en busca de auxilio y deseosa de que la enseñe. Eso me infunde gran confianza, porque no puedo menos de pensar que muchas veces nos equivocamos al medir el amor divino basándonos en el conocimiento de los pecadores. Ella se dispone a escribir una carta a sus amigos y parientes de Hall Farm, para que yo se la entregue después de su muerte y cuando le dije que usted estaba aquí, me contestó: «Me gustaría mucho despedirme

de Adam y rogarle que me perdone». ¿Quiere venir, Adam?

—No puedo. No puedo despedirme de ella mientras exista alguna esperanza. No hago más que escuchar los ruidos de la prisión, porque no creo posible que vaya a morir de muerte tan vergonzosa.

Se levantó de nuevo y miró a través de la ventana, mientras Dinah esperaba con su habitual paciencia. Después de un par de minutos, él se volvió y dijo:

—Iré, Dinah…, mañana por la mañana…, si es preciso. Seguramente me sentiré más animado si sé que no hay otro remedio. Dígale que la perdono, y que iré… en el último momento.

—No quiero contrariar los impulsos de su corazón, Adam —dijo Dinah—, pero debo apresurarme a volver a su lado, porque ella no quiere perderme de vista. Antes apenas correspondía a mi afecto, pero ahora ha abierto su corazón. Adiós, Adam, que nuestro Padre celestial le consuele y le dé la fuerza necesaria para soportar el dolor.

Dinah le ofreció la mano y Adam la estrechó en silencio. Barde Massey se puso en pie para abrir la puerta, pero antes de que llegase junto a ella, la joven le dijo adiós y empezó a bajar la escalera con sus ligeros pasos.

—Bueno —dijo Barde quitándose las gafas y guardándolas en el bolsillo—. Es muy justo que si en el mundo han de existir mujeres destinadas a causar molestias, por lo menos las haya también capaces de consolar. Y ésta es una de ellas, sin duda alguna. Es una lástima que sea metodista. Pero ya es sabido que no existe una sola mujer que no esté loca de remate.

Adam no se acostó aquella noche, porque la excitación y la ansiedad, que aumentaban por momentos a medida que se aproximaba la hora fatal, eran excesivas para permitirle dormir. Y a pesar de sus ruegos y de las promesas de que no haría ningún ruido, el maestro de escuela tampoco se acostó.

—¿Qué me importa dormir una noche más o menos? —dijo—. Tiempo me quedará para hacerlo cuando me hayan enterrado. Por consiguiente, déjame que te haga compañía mientras pueda.

En aquella pequeña habitación, la noche fue larga y penosa. A veces Adam se ponía en pie y paseaba un rato de un lado a otro, y luego se sentaba para ocultar el rostro, sin que se oyese otro ruido que el tictac del reloj que estaba sobre la mesa o la caída de las cenizas del fuego que cuidaba el maestro. A veces exclamaba con la mayor vehemencia:

—Si yo hubiese podido hacer algo por salvarla…, o declarar algo a su favor, pero no tengo más remedio que esperar, no puedo hacer nada. ¡Y pensar lo distinta que sería nuestra suerte de no haber sido por él! ¡Dios mío! Precisamente hoy deberíamos habernos casado.

—Sí, hijo mío —decía Bartle con ternura—. Es muy duro, mucho; pero recuerda que cuando pensaste en casarte con ella ya suponías que en su interior había algo que desconocías. Sin embargo, no pudiste imaginar que se hubiese vuelto tan mala.

—Ya lo sé —contestó Adam—. Yo me figuraba que era una muchacha afectuosa y tierna, incapaz de mentir o de actuar mal. ¿Cómo podía imaginarme otra cosa? Además, estoy seguro de que si él no hubiera llegado a conocerla y yo me hubiese casado con ella, para amarla y cuidarla, jamás habría cometido ningún acto reprobable. Poco importa que yo hubiese tenido que sufrir un poco a su lado, pues, en cualquier caso, nunca habría ocurrido esta desgracia.

—Eso nunca se sabe, muchacho. Nunca es posible asegurar lo que va a ocurrir. Tu dolor actual es muy grande, pero ya se calmará a medida que trascurra el tiempo. Estoy seguro de que volverás a ser un hombre feliz y quizás de todo esto te resultará algún bien que ahora no podemos adivinar.

—¿Que de eso resultará algún bien? —exclamó Adam apasionadamente—. Eso no cambiará el mal. Su desgracia no puede evitarse ni deshacerse. Odio oír hablar a esas personas que para todo tienen remedio. Más valdría que se ocupasen en que no ocurriesen las cosas malas. Cuando un hombre ha destrozado la vida de su prójimo, no tiene derecho a consolarse pensando que de ello puede resultar algún bien, porque el bien que corresponde a otro nunca podrá borrar la vergüenza o la desgracia de esa pobre muchacha.

—Bueno, hijo mío —dijo Barde en tono cariñoso, que contrastaba con su habitual impaciencia—. Soy un viejo y hace ya muchos años también estuve en una situación desagradable. Es muy fácil hallar razones para justificar la resignación de los demás.

—Señor Massey —dijo Adam—, comprendo que mi carácter es impetuoso y a veces obro de un modo imprudente. Le debo otro comportamiento. Pero no por eso piense mal de mí.

—De ninguna manera, hijo mío. No tengas cuidado.

Así pasaron la noche, muy inquietos, hasta que la fría aurora y la luz del día les proporcionaron la tranquilidad de que a veces se goza en el borde de la desesperación. Pronto no habría ya motivo de inquietud ni de ansiedad.

—Vamos ahora a la cárcel, señor Massey —dijo Adam al ver que su reloj señalaba las seis.

—Si hubiese alguna noticia ya la sabríamos.

No. No había ninguna noticia, no se había recibido la orden de suspender la ejecución.

Adam permaneció media hora en el patio antes de que pudiese hacer pasar a Dinah el aviso de su llegada. Pero resonó una voz junto a su oído y a su pesar, se enteró de la orden fatal:

—Hay que preparar el carro para las siete y media.

Era preciso ir a dar a Hetty el último adiós, pues no había ya ninguna esperanza.

Diez minutos después Adam se encontraba a la puerta de la celda. Dinah le había mandado aviso de que no podía ir a recibirle, pues no se decidía a abandonar a Hetty un solo momento, y añadió que estaba ya preparada para la entrevista.

Al entrar no pudo verla, pues la agitación le quitó el uso de sus sentidos y le pareció que el calabozo estaba completamente a oscuras. En cuanto la puerta se hubo cerrado a sus espaldas, se quedó un momento tembloroso y atontado. Sin embargo, pronto empezó a distinguir los objetos y no tardó en ver los negros ojos fijos en él una vez más, aunque no había en ellos una expresión sonriente.

¡Oh, Dios mío, qué tristes estaban! La última vez que la vio fue cuando se despidió de ella, con el corazón lleno de alegría, de esperanza y de amor, y entonces le miraron sonrientes y llenos de lágrimas, en aquel rostro gracioso e infantil. Ahora el semblante de la joven parecía de mármol. Los dulces labios estaban pálidos, entreabiertos y temblorosos. Habían desaparecido todos los hoyuelos, a excepción de uno que nunca se borraba de su rostro. ¡Oh, y lo peor era que seguía pareciéndose a ella misma! La pobre Hetty le miró con inmensa tristeza, como si se hubiese levantado entre los muertos para comunicarle su desgracia.

Estaba abrazada a Dinah y apoyaba su mejilla en la de ésta. Parecía como si todo su vigor dependiese de aquel último contacto.

Cuando los tristes ojos de ambos se encontraron, cuando Hetty y Adam se miraron el uno al otro, ella también advirtió la transformación del joven, cosa que, al parecer, le infundió nuevos temores. Era la primera vez que veía a alguien cuyo rostro parecía reflejar el cambio sufrido por ella misma. Adam era a la vez un recuerdo del feliz pasado y una imagen del espantoso presente, y, al mirarle, Hetty se estremeció más intensamente.

—Háblale, Hetty —dijo Dinah—. Dile lo que hay en tu corazón.

Hetty obedeció como una niña.

—Adam…, lo siento mucho… Me he portado muy mal contigo. ¿Quieres perdonarme antes de mi muerte?

—Sí, te perdono, Hetty —contestó un Adam sollozante—. Hace ya mucho tiempo que te he perdonado.

En los primeros momentos, al ver a Hetty sumida de tal modo en la angustia, Adam creyó que su cerebro iba a estallar; pero el sonido de su voz al pronunciar aquellas palabras de arrepentimiento hizo vibrar en él una cuerda que estaba menos tirante; experimentó cierto alivio en aquella situación insoportable y a sus ojos se asomaron algunas lágrimas, que no había derramado desde que se abrazó a Seth en los primeros días de su dolor. Hetty hizo un movimiento involuntario hacia él y le dijo con timidez:

—¿Quieres volver a besarme, Adam, a pesar de lo mala que he sido?

Adam tomó la pálida mano que ella le tendía y cruzaron un triste beso de despedida eterna.

—Y dile a él —añadió Hetty con voz de extraña firmeza—, dile…, porque nadie más que tú puede decírselo, que cuando fui en su busca y no lo encontré, le odié y le maldije… Pero Dinah dice que he de perdonarle…, y así lo procuro…, para que Dios me perdone a mí.

En aquel momento resonó un ruido en la puerta, giró la llave en la cerradura y, cuando se abrió, Adam vio algunos rostros desconocidos. Estaba demasiado agitado para fijarse en nada más, y ni siquiera observó que el señor Irwine formaba parte del grupo. Comprendió que empezaban los últimos preparativos y que no podía continuar allí. En silencio le dejaron salir y se encaminó a su solitaria habitación, dejando a Barde Massey para que fuese testigo de lo que iba a ocurrir.

XLVII

El último momento

Hubo un suspiro general que algunas personas recordaron mejor que sus propios pesares cuando, en la mañana gris, la carreta fatal, en la que estaban subidas dos mujeres, atravesó la multitud en dirección al horrible símbolo de la muerte repentina y deliberadamente infligida.

Todo Stoniton había oído hablar de Dinah Morris, la joven metodista que había conseguido que la obstinada criminal confesara, y, por consiguiente, había tanto interés en verla a ella como a Hetty.

Pero Dinah apenas se fijaba en la multitud. Cuando Hetty vio la muchedumbre que esperaba su paso, se abrazó convulsivamente a Dinah.

—Cierra los ojos, Hetty —le dijo su compañera—. Y recemos sin parar.

Y, en voz baja, mientras la carreta atravesaba la curiosa multitud, dirigió la última súplica al cielo en favor de la temblorosa condenada, que se agarraba a ella como si fuese una niña amedrentada que tratase de ocultarse en el regazo de su madre.

Dinah ignoraba el silencio de la multitud, que la contemplaba con admiración. No sabía, tampoco, lo cerca que estaban de la plaza fatal. De pronto el vehículo se detuvo y casi perdió el sentido al oír un fuerte y horrible grito, como si fuese el aullido de numerosos demonios. El que profirió Hetty se mezcló con el de la muchedumbre, y ambas jóvenes, horrorizadas, se abrazaron.

Pero aquel grito no era de maldición, ni tampoco de cruel alegría. Anuncia la aparición de un jinete que atraviesa la multitud a galope. El caballo parece exánime, pero aún responde a las espuelas del caballero, que mira con ojos de loco algo que nadie más que él sabe. Agita una mano que sujeta un papel, como haciendo una señal.

El sheriff le reconoce. Es Arthur Donnithorne, que lleva en la mano el perdón, conseguido tras grandes dificultades.

XLVIII

OTRO ENCUENTRO EN EL BOSQUE

A la tarde siguiente dos hombres marchaban, desde puntos opuestos, en dirección al mismo lugar e impulsados por el mismo recuerdo. La escena era la alameda del cazadero de Donnithorne, y el lector ya supondrá quiénes eran aquellos dos hombres.

En la misma mañana se había celebrado el entierro del anciano caballero y se leyó el testamento; y aprovechando el primer momento libre que tuvo, Arthur Donnithorne salió a dar un paseo para fijar su porvenir y confirmarse en su triste decisión. Y creyó que en la alameda podía hacerlo mejor que en otro lugar cualquiera.

También Adam había regresado de Stoniton el lunes por la mañana y aquel día no abandonó su casa más que para ir a visitar a los habitantes de Hall Farm, con objeto de añadir más información a las noticias del señor Irwine. Convino con los Poyser que los seguiría al lugar adonde marchasen para establecerse, cualquiera que éste fuese, porque estaba dispuesto a dimitir de la administración de los bosques tan pronto como ello le fuese posible; terminaría también sus negocios con Jonathan Burge, e iría a establecerse con su madre y Seth cerca de los amigos a quienes se sentía unido por el dolor.

—Seth y yo no tardaremos en encontrar trabajo —dijo—. Un hombre que sabe su oficio en todas partes está como en su casa. Por consiguiente, volveremos a empezar. Mi madre no se opone, porque desde que he vuelto a casa dice que está decidida a que la entierren en otra parroquia, siempre y cuando yo esté a gusto en otra parte. Es maravillosa su conformidad. Parece como si el gran dolor que hemos sufrido la hubiese apaciguado y calmado. Todos estaremos mejor en otra comarca, aunque, de todos modos, nos será muy doloroso abandonar esto. Sin embargo, señor Poyser, no quiero separarme de usted y de los suyos, porque el dolor ha creado entre nosotros un lazo de parentesco.

—Sí, amigo mío —contestó Martin—. Nos iremos a donde no podamos oír el nombre de ese individuo, pero dudo de que podamos alejarnos bastante para que la gente no descubra por qué nos hemos marchado de aquí, que uno de los nuestros ha sido deportado más allá de los mares después de haberse librado de la horca.

Aquella tarde era la última que Adam pensaba dedicar al dolor. La ansiedad había desaparecido y era preciso que se resignase con lo que ya no podía cambiarse. Estaba resuelto a no ver nunca más a Arthur Donnithorne, siempre y cuando le fuese posible evitarlo. No tenía tampoco nada que decirle de parte de Hetty, pues ésta le había visto y Adam no se fiaba de sí mismo, pues ya había aprendido a temer la violencia de sus sentimientos. Las palabras del señor Irwine acerca de que debía recordar sus temores después de golpear a Arthur en la alameda, continuaban fijas en su memoria.

Sin cesar pensaba en Arthur y también continuamente recordaba la alameda y, en especial, el lugar donde divisó a las dos figuras inclinadas una hacia otra.

«Esta tarde iré allá por última vez —se dijo—. Eso me hará bien y volveré a sentir lo mismo que después de haberle derribado. Comprendo que hice mal y lo mismo sentí en cuanto lo hube hecho, al creer que había muerto».

Y así fue como Arthur y Adam, a la misma hora, se dirigían al mismo sitio.

Adam vestía su traje de faena, porque, dando un suspiro de alivio, se quitó el otro en cuanto llegó a su casa. Y si hubiese llevado al hombro el capazo de las herramientas, habría podido parecerse a su propio espectro, al mismo Adam Bede que penetró en la alameda aquella tarde de agosto, o sea ocho meses atrás. Pero no llevaba consigo el capazo, ni andaba o miraba a su alrededor tan erguido como antes. Llevaba las

manos en los bolsillos del pantalón y tenía la mirada fija en el suelo. En cuanto hubo entrado en la alameda se detuvo ante un haya. Conocía muy bien aquel árbol, pues era el poste indicador del fin de su juventud, del momento en que tuvo que renunciar a sus más caras ilusiones. Estaba seguro de que nunca más volvería a tenerlas, y, sin embargo, en aquel momento recordó con nostalgia el afecto que había sentido por Arthur Donnithorne, en quien tanta confianza depositara antes de la escena ocurrida ocho meses atrás. Era el suyo un afecto parecido al que se siente por los muertos porque en realidad, para Adam, el Arthur de su adolescencia no existía ya.

Percibió el ruido de unos pasos que se acercaban, pero como el haya estaba en una curva del camino, no pudo ver quién llegaba hasta que, de pronto, y a dos metros de distancia, se presentó la alta y esbelta figura, vestida de luto, de Arthur. Ambos se sobresaltaron y se contemplaron en silencio. Durante los quince días anteriores, Adam se había imaginado con frecuencia frente a frente con Arthur, como en aquel momento, dirigiéndole palabras que habían de causarle grandes remordimientos, el mismo dolor que él había producido. Y también se dijo, muchas veces, que más convenía evitar tal encuentro. Pero, al imaginárselo, siempre se figuró a Arthur como en aquella tarde del mes de agosto, es decir, sonriente, descuidado y alegre; por eso la solemne figura dolorida que vio ante él le conmovió un poco. Adam ya sabía lo que era el dolor y no podía enfrentarse a un hombre dolido. No sintió ningún impulso al que tuviera que resistir, y el silencio le pareció el mejor reproche. Arthur fue el primero en hablar.

—Es una suerte que nos hayamos encontrado, porque deseaba verte. Incluso estaba dispuesto a llamarte mañana.

Hizo una pausa y Adam no contestó.

—Comprendo que te disguste verme —continuó Arthur—, pero eso no es fácil que vuelva a ocurrir durante muchos años.

—No, señor —contestó fríamente Adam—. Eso es, precisamente, lo que quería escribirle mañana, pues deseo evitar todo trato con usted y que otro venga a encargarse de administrar los bosques.

Arthur sufrió el impacto del reproche y tuvo que hacer un esfuerzo para replicar.

—También yo quería hablarte de esto. No deseo suavizar tu indignación contra mí o rogarte que hagas algo en mi favor. Sólo quiero pedirte que me ayudes a atenuar las consecuencias desagradables del pasado, que ya no es posible alterar. No me refiero a las consecuencias que se relacionan conmigo, sino con los demás. Sé que puedo hacer muy poco, y comprendo que no podré modificar lo peor. Pero algo puedo hacer y en eso debes ayudarme. ¿Quieres escucharme con paciencia?

—Sí, señor —contestó Adam después de ligera vacilación—. Le oiré y si puedo mejorar alguna cosa, lo haré sin duda, porque ya sé que la cólera no arregla nada.

—Yo me dirigía ahora al Hermitage —dijo Arthur—. ¿Quieres acompañarme para que nos sentemos allí? Podremos hablar mejor que aquí.

Nadie había entrado en el Hermitage después del momento en que ambos habían salido de él, porque Arthur había guardado la llave en su escritorio. Y al abrir la puerta vieron la vela consumida en su palmatoria y el sillón en el mismo lugar en que se sentó Adam; allí estaba, también, el cesto de los papeles a rebosar, y en su interior Arthur pudo divisar el pañuelo de seda roja. Y sin duda le habría sido muy doloroso volver a entrar en aquel lugar si sus pensamientos anteriores no fueran tan tristes.

Se sentaron frente a frente, en los mismos sitios que habían ocupado en la otra ocasión, y Arthur dijo:

—Voy a marcharme, Adam. Me propongo ingresar en el ejército.

El pobre Arthur se imaginó que esa noticia impresionaría a Adam, despertando quizás su simpatía; pero los labios del joven permanecieron cerrados y no se alteró la expresión de su rostro.

—Quiero decirte —continuó Arthur— que una de mis razones para marcharme es que nadie tenga necesidad de salir de Hayslope, porque no quiero que nadie abandone este lugar por culpa mía. Haría cualquier cosa y no vacilaría ante ningún sacrificio para evitar un nuevo dolor a los demás y a consecuencia… de lo ocurrido.

Las palabras de Arthur tuvieron un efecto distinto por completo del que había imaginado. Al advertir Adam su deseo de compensar en lo posible el mal que había hecho, sintió despertar su indignación. Estaba dispuesto a afrontar cara a cara los hechos penosos, y Arthur, en cambio, parecía inclinado a apartar la vista de ellos. Además, Adam sentía el receloso orgullo de un pobre en presencia de un rico, y con su severidad de otros tiempos, replicó:

—Ya es demasiado tarde para eso, señor. Lo que debe hacer un hombre es evitar una mala acción antes de realizarla, porque los sacrificios no pueden deshacer los hechos. Cuando se ha herido los sentimientos de las personas, no es posible compensarlas con ningún favor.

—¿Favor? —exclamó—. ¿Cómo puedes imaginarte que me propongo semejante cosa? Pero el señor

Irwine me ha dicho que los Poyser piensan abandonar la granja en que han vivido durante varios años, mejor dicho, durante varias generaciones. ¿No comprendes, como comprende el señor Irwine, que, si se les pudiera persuadir de que olvidasen el sentimiento que les obliga a alejarse, sería mucho mejor que continuasen en el mismo sitio y rodeados de los vecinos y de los amigos que les quieren y les conocen?

—Eso es verdad —replicó fríamente Adam—. ¡Pero no es tan fácil convencer a la gente! Muy duro será para Martin Poyser tener que marcharse a otra localidad, para verse rodeado de rostros extraños, después de haberse criado en Hall Farm y antes de él su padre; pero aún más duro le sería quedarse. Estas cosas, señor, ya no tienen remedio.

Arthur guardó unos instantes de silencio, porque a pesar de sus sentimientos el orgullo protestaba al oír las palabras de Adam. ¿Acaso no sufría él también? ¿No se veía obligado a renunciar a sus más queridas esperanzas? Y advertía que, como ocho meses atrás, Adam le obligaba a sentir con mayor intensidad lo irrevocable de su imprudente conducta, y que le presentaba precisamente la resistencia que más irritaba a su ardiente y vehemente naturaleza. Pero su cólera se apaciguó gracias a la misma influencia que calmó la de Adam cuando, poco antes, se vieron frente a frente, es decir, gracias a las huellas del sufrimiento de un rostro muy conocido. Y Arthur terminó su lucha interior diciéndose que todo podía perdonárselo a Adam, pues él, a su vez, tuvo que sufrir mucho. Sin embargo, hubo un tono de ruego y de disgusto juvenil en su voz cuando dijo:

—Pero la gente puede empeorar las injurias gracias a una conducta poco razonable, o entregándose a la cólera en vez de pensar en el futuro. Si yo tuviera que permanecer aquí y actuar como propietario rural —añadió con mayor vehemencia—, si nada me importase lo que he hecho y las desgracias que he causado, tú, Adam, tendrías motivo más que sobrado para marcharte y para aconsejar a los demás que te imitasen. Entonces tendrías alguna razón para empeorar las cosas; pero cuando te digo que voy a ausentarme por espacio de muchos años, cuando tú sabes muy bien lo que eso significa para mí y cómo destruye todos los planes de felicidad que había formado, es imposible que un hombre razonable como tú crea que los Poyser tienen motivo para insistir en marcharse. Comprendo sus sentimientos relativos a esta deshonra. El señor Irwine me lo ha contado todo, pero también es de la opinión que deberían convencerse de que no están deshonrados a los ojos de sus vecinos, y si tú me ayudas, incluso sería posible persuadirles de que continuaran donde están, siempre y cuando tú también continúes administrando mis bosques.

Arthur hizo una pausa y luego añadió en tono de súplica:

—Sabes perfectamente que aparte de lo que yo haga, tú puedes llevar a cabo muchas cosas buenas en favor de los demás. También es posible que tengáis a otro señor, por quien trabajaríais a gusto. Si yo muero, heredará la propiedad mi primo Tradgett, que tomará mi nombre. Mi primo es un buen muchacho; tú ya le conoces.

Adam se sintió impresionado por estas palabras que acababa de pronunciar el mismo Arthur honrado y generoso a quien tanto había querido y de quien se enorgulleció en otro tiempo. Pero los recuerdos más recientes no abandonaban su memoria, así que guardó silencio. Pese a eso, Arthur leyó la respuesta en su rostro y ello le animó a decir con mayor vehemencia:

—Además, si tú quieres hablar a los Poyser, si quieres tratar del asunto con el señor Irwine, pues él piensa ir a verte mañana, y si, además, unieses tus razones a las suyas para aconsejarles que no se marchasen… Me consta que no aceptarían de mí ningún favor y no me propongo tal cosa. Pero estoy seguro de que, al fin, sufrirían bastante menos. Irwine cree lo mismo y ten en cuenta que él gozará de la máxima autoridad en la propiedad, pues ha consentido en hacerse cargo de ella. En realidad, sólo estarán sujetos a un hombre a quien respetan y a quien quieren. Y lo mismo ocurriría con respecto a ti, Adam, de modo que si persistís en marcharos, veré en ello vuestro deseo de infligirme un dolor mayor.

Arthur guardó silencio unos instantes.

—Yo no me portaría así contigo —añadió con voz agitada—. Si estuvieras en mi lugar y yo en el tuyo, me esforzaría en obrar mejor.

Adam hizo un movimiento de inquietud en su sillón, miró al suelo y Arthur continuó:

—Tal vez en tu vida, Adam, no hayas hecho nunca ninguna cosa de la que tengas que arrepentirte. De otro modo serías más generoso. Entonces sabrías que esto es mucho peor para mí que para ti.

Arthur se levantó, fue a mirar a través de la ventana, dando la espalda a Adam, y continuó:

—¿Acaso no la amé yo también? ¿No la vi ayer? ¿No la recordaré tanto como puedas recordarla tú? ¿Y no crees que tú sufrirías bastante más si fueses culpable?

Hubo un largo silencio mientras Adam luchaba consigo mismo. Los espíritus superficiales, cuyas sensaciones emotivas dejan poca impresión en su ánimo, no apreciarían la lucha que hubo de sostener antes de levantarse y volverse hacia Arthur. Este lo oyó moverse y miró a su compañero, quien dijo:

—Es cierto lo que dice, señor. Soy duro y ello está en mi naturaleza. Lo fui con mi padre por su mala conducta. He sido duro con todo el mundo, a excepción de ella, pues me pareció que nadie la compadecía bastante, y su dolor casi me volvió loco. Y cuando vi que sus parientes de la granja eran demasiado duros con ella, me prometí ser, en adelante, más comprensivo y benévolo con todo el mundo. Tal vez por haberme afectado tanto todo lo de ella no me he portado bien con usted. Sé que en mi vida debo arrepentirme de algunas cosas y comprendo que ya es demasiado tarde. Fui demasiado severo con mi padre, que ya ha muerto; ahora lo comprendo. Por consiguiente, no tengo derecho a hacer lo mismo con usted, para tener que arrepentirme luego.

Adam pronunció estas palabras como hombre resuelto a decir cuanto sentía, pero añadió un poco indeciso:

—Otra vez no quise estrecharle la mano, señor, cuando usted me lo pidió. ¿Querrá ahora hacerlo, a pesar de mi negativa anterior?

La blanca mano de Arthur cayó en el acto sobre la de Adam, y por un momento los dos volvieron a sentir su antiguo afecto.

—Adam —dijo Arthur dispuesto ya a confesarlo todo—, nada de eso habría ocurrido si yo hubiera sabido que tú la querías. Eso me habría ayudado a salvarme. Yo luché; nunca tuve la menor intención de causar ningún daño. Luego te engañé a ti, lo cual tuvo peores consecuencias. Pero creí que no tenía otro remedio y que era lo mejor que podía hacer. En aquella carta le pedí que me comunicase cualquier dificultad en que pudiera hallarse, pues estaba dispuesto a hacer en su favor cuanto me fuese posible. Pero todo empezó mal desde el principio y finalmente ha terminado de un modo horrible. Dios sabe muy bien que daría mi vida porque no hubiese ocurrido nada de eso.

Continuaron sentados frente a frente y Adam dijo con voz trémula:

—¿Cómo estaba cuando la dejó, señor?

—No me lo preguntes, Adam —contestó Arthur—, porque a veces creo que voy a volverme loco al pensar en su aspecto y al recordar lo que me dijo. Por otra parte, no pude obtener un perdón completo, ni me fue posible evitar su deportación. Nada podré hacer por ella durante esos largos años y hasta es posible que la pobre muera y nunca más vuelva a tener consuelo.

—¡Ah, señor! —dijo Adam que, por primera vez, sentía su propio dolor en armonía con Arthur—. Usted y yo hemos pensado en la misma cosa cuando estábamos separados. Rogaré a Dios que le ayude, así como le ruego que me ayude a mí.

—Y ahora pienso en esa cariñosa mujer, Dinah Morris —dijo Arthur, siguiendo el hilo de sus pensamientos y sin comprender el sentido de las palabras de Adam—. Dice que la acompañará hasta el último momento, hasta el instante de su marcha. Y la pobrecilla busca en ella el amparo como fuente de todo consuelo. Capaz sería de adorar a esa mujer, y no sé, realmente, qué haría si ella no estuviese allí. Cuando vuelva, Adam, procura verla, porque ayer no pude expresarle mis sentimientos. Dile —añadió Arthur esforzándose en dominar su emoción, mientras sacaba del bolsillo el reloj y la cadena—, dile que te he rogado que le entregases esto. Ya sé que a ella no le importan esas cosas, ni nada de lo que pueda darle. Sin embargo quizás le sea útil el reloj, y a mí, en cambio, me complacerá saber que ella lo usa.

—Se lo daré, señor —dijo Adam—, y le comunicaré sus palabras. Ella me dijo que volvería a Hall Farm para vivir con sus parientes.

—Además, procura persuadir a los Poyser de que se queden —añadió Arthur recordando el asunto que habían olvidado ambos al sentir renacer su amistad—. Tú quédate también y ayuda al señor Irwine a realizar las reparaciones y las mejoras necesarias en la propiedad.

—Hay un detalle, señor, en el que quizás no ha pensado —replicó Adam con acento afable e inseguro—, y es que tanto yo como los Poyser si nos quedamos será porque nuestra conciencia así nos lo ordena; no porque esperemos ser premiados por nuestra resignación.

—Mira, Adam —exclamó Arthur—, te suplico que no empeores mi situación, porque ya estoy bastante castigado.

—No, señor, no —contestó Adam mirándole con tristeza y afecto—. No quiera Dios tal cosa. Impulsado por la pasión me habría alejado de esta comarca, pero entonces me figuraba que usted mostraba cierta indiferencia por lo sucedido. Por consiguiente, me quedaré y haré cuanto pueda. Por ahora no puedo pensar más que en trabajar bien y mejorar las cosas todo lo que me sea posible.

—Ahora nos despediremos, Adam. Mañana verás al señor Irwine y podrás consultarle cuanto quieras.

—¿Se marcha tan pronto, señor? —preguntó Adam.

—Lo antes posible, en cuanto haya dispuesto lo necesario. Adiós, Adam.

—Adiós, señor. ¡Dios le bendiga!

De nuevo se estrecharon la mano y Adam salió del Hermitage diciéndose que su dolor era más soportable, puesto que ya no sentía ningún odio.

En cuanto se cerró la puerta tras él, Arthur se acercó al cesto de los papeles y sacó el pañuelo de seda rojo.

LIBRO SEXTO

XLIX

En Hall Farm

El tibio sol de una tarde de otoño, dieciocho meses después de los acontecimientos que acabamos de relatar, bañaba con sus rayos oblicuos el patio de Hall Farm. Era la hora en que las vacas, ahítas de luz y de hierba fresca, volvían a los establos. La señora Poyser, para quien esta sencilla escena constituía un magnífico espectáculo, acostumbraba sentarse a aquella hora a la puerta de la casa con la calceta entre las manos.

Sin embargo, aquel día apenas prestó atención a la llegada de los pacíficos rumiantes, pues había entablado una discusión con Dinah mientras la joven cosía unos cuellos de camisa del señor Poyser, y soportó pacientemente que Totty le rompiese por tres veces el hilo, tirándole del brazo con el ruego insistente de que contemplase la muñeca de madera, sin piernas, cubierta por una camisa azul, y cuya cabeza calva acariciaba la niña con entusiasmo sentada en una silla al lado de Dinah. Totty tenía ya dos años más que cuando la conoció el lector y bajo su delantalito llevaba un traje negro. Del mismo color vestía la señora Poyser y eso acentuaba el parecido familiar entre ella y Dinah. Por lo demás, apenas se advertía algún cambio en nuestras viejas amigas ni en su agradable morada provista de muebles y utensilios de roble pulimentado y de peltre.

—Nunca he visto a nadie como tú, Dinah —dijo la señora Poyser—. Cuando te metes una idea en la cabeza, no hay manera de convencerte de lo contrario. Y, por más que digas, eso no es religión. Recuerda que el «sermón de la montaña», que tanto te gusta leer a los niños, recomienda hacer cosas agradables a los demás. No dudo de que si alguien te pidiese algo poco razonable, como regalar la capa o dejarte pegar, te manifestarías dispuesta a ello; pero, en cambio, demuestras la mayor testarudez al negarte a hacer cosas que aconseja el sentido común.

—No, querida tía —dijo Dinah sonriendo y sin abandonar su tarea—. Tu deseo bastaría para que yo hiciese cualquier cosa, siempre que no fuese inconveniente.

—¿Inconveniente? Estás acabando con mi paciencia. Me gustaría saber qué hay de inconveniente en que vivas con tus amigos y seas feliz con ellos, pues no quieren más que tu bien y están dispuestos a mantenerte, aunque tu trabajo no pagara con exceso lo poco que comes y lo mal que vistes. ¿Y a quién has de ayudar y consolar en el mundo, más que a los que son de tu propia sangre, es decir, a mí, que soy tu tía, y tu única pariente, cuando sabes que todos los inviernos me veo al borde de la tumba sin contar con que esa niña se morirá de pena si te marchas y que el abuelo aún no hace un año que se murió, y que tu propio tío te echaría mucho de menos, pues nadie como tú sabe encender su pipa y cuidarle? Y yo, por mi parte, ya puedo confiarte la manteca, aunque me costó bastante trabajo enseñarte; además, piensa en lo que hay que coser y en que si te marchases tendría que mandarlo a Treddleston, a que lo hiciese una desconocida. Y todo porque te crees obligada a vivir entre aquel montón de piedras, es decir, un lugar por el que los mismos cuervos pasan de largo.

—Querida tía Rachel —contestó Dinah mirando a la señora Poyser—, tu bondad te hace creer que te soy útil. En realidad no me necesitas, porque Nancy y Molly son muchachas inteligentes que trabajan muy bien, y tú, gracias a Dios, tienes muy buena salud; mi tío vuelve a estar alegre, y ambos tenéis muchos amigos y vecinos, que vienen todos los días a visitar a mi tío. Así pues, no me echarás de menos. En cambio, en Snowfield hay muchos hermanos míos que sufren gran necesidad y que carecen de todos los consuelos y comodidades que vosotros tenéis. Siento la obligación de volver al lado de aquellos desgraciados y me veo atraída por las montañas, donde me bendecían al llevar palabras de vida y de esperanza a los tristes y

pecadores.

—Sí —replicó la señora Poyser dirigiendo una mirada distraída a las vacas—, esto es lo que me dices siempre. ¿Para qué quieres ir a predicar más de lo que predicas ahora? ¿Acaso no te vas todos los domingos, Dios sabe adonde, a predicar y a rezar? ¿No hay bastantes metodistas en Treddleston, ni bastante gente que te demuestre su simpatía? ¿No hay, acaso, en esta misma parroquia, que tienes al alcance de la mano, bastante gente a la que convenga cuidar, corregir y consolar? Por ejemplo, ahí tienes a Bess Cranage, que a las tres semanas de haberte marchado ya no pensará en otra cosa que en trajes y lazos. En cambio, mientras estés aquí, con seguridad no hará tal cosa. Pero supongo que te importan muy poco las personas de esta comarca, porque de lo contrario te quedarías con tu tía, a quien puedes prestar muy valiosa ayuda.

Había entonces algo en la voz de la señora Poyser que ésta no quiso dar a entender, y así, se volvió para consultar el reloj y dijo:

—Mira, ya es la hora del té y si Martin está en la era se tomará con gusto una taza. Ven, querida Totty, deja que tu madre te ponga el gorro y luego ve a la era a buscar a tu padre y dile que antes de marcharse venga a tomar una taza de té. Avisa también a tus hermanos.

Totty salió a cumplir estas instrucciones, mientras la señora Poyser ponía lo necesario sobre la brillante mesa de roble y cogía las tazas de té del aparador.

—Y en cuanto a que Nancy y Molly sean inteligentes en su trabajo —añadió—, te engañas por completo. Tanto importa que sean inteligentes como tontas, porque una no puede fiarse de ellas ni por espacio de un minuto. Siempre hay que vigilarlas para que no se estén mano sobre mano. Y suponte que este invierno caigo enferma, como me ocurrió el pasado, ¿quién cuidará de ellas si tú te marchas? Luego a esa pobre niña estoy segura de que le ocurriría algo. La dejarían caer en el fuego, coger la sartén con el aceite hirviendo, o sufriría algún accidente que la dejase inválida para toda la vida. Y de todo eso tendrías tú la culpa, Dinah.

—Tía —dijo Dinah—, te prometo volver en invierno si estás enferma. En cuanto me necesites siempre me tendrás a tu lado. Pero la verdad es que conviene a mi alma alejarme de esta vida cómoda y lujosa, en la que tengo demasiadas cosas de que gozar, y así, por lo menos, me iré aunque sólo sea por un tiempo. Nadie más que yo sabe lo que me conviene y los peligros que corro. Tu deseo de que me quede no es un deber que me niegue a cumplir porque vaya contra mis deseos. Es una tentación que he de resistir, porque de lo contrario el amor al prójimo se dormiría en mi alma, cerrándola a la luz celestial.

—No llego a comprender qué quieres decir al hablar de lujos y de comodidades —replicó la señora Poyser mientras cortaba el pan y la manteca—. Cierto es que aquí puedes comer bien, porque nadie en mi casa puede quejarse de que no le doy lo necesario. Pero he notado que cuando hay algo que radie quiere comerse, lo tomas tú siempre. Pero mira —añadió de pronto—, aquí tenemos a Adam Bede que trae a la niña. Me extraña que haya venido tan temprano.

La señora Poyser se encaminó hacia la puerta para tener el placer de ver a su hijita y la miró con amor; sin embargo le dijo:

—¡Qué vergüenza, Totty! Las niñas de cinco años ya no deben consentir que las lleven en brazos. Le va a fatigar, Adam, pesa mucho. Déjela, déjela en el suelo.

—No, no —contestó Adam—. Puedo levantarla con una sola mano y ni siquiera tengo necesidad de emplear el brazo.

Totty, indiferente a las observaciones de su madre, se vio depositada en el suelo junto a la puerta, y la madre subrayó su reprensión con un diluvio de besos.

—Sin duda se extraña de verme a esta hora —dijo Adam.

—Sí. Pero entre —contestó la señora Poyser dejándole paso—. Supongo que no ocurre nada desagradable.

—Nada malo —contestó Adam acercándose a Dinah y tendiéndole la mano.

Ella había abandonado su tarea e instintivamente se puso en pie al acercarse él, y un ligero rubor tiñó sus pálidas mejillas cuando le dio la mano y le miró con timidez.

—Vengo a decirle algo, Dinah —añadió Adam sin que al parecer se diese cuenta de que todavía le tenía la mano cogida—. Mi madre está un poco indispuesta y se ha empeñado en que vaya a pasar la noche con ella, si es tan buena como para hacer caso de su petición. Yo le prometí venir a verle y a pedírselo a mi regreso del pueblo. La pobre trabaja mucho y todavía no he podido lograr que tome una muchacha para que la ayude. No sé lo que podré hacer para convencerla.

Al dejar de hablar, Adam abandonó la mano de Dinah y se quedó esperando la respuesta; pero antes de que ella abriese los labios, la señora Poyser dijo:

—Fíjate. Ya te dije antes que en esta parroquia había bastantes personas de quien podrías cuidar, sin necesidad de alejarte. Aquí tienes a la señora Bede que empieza a envejecer y que no querrá que la cuide

nadie más que tú. Seguro que la gente de Snowfield ya se habrá acostumbrado a pasarse sin ti durante tu ausencia.

—Me pondré el gorro y saldré enseguida, si usted, tía, no quiere que haga antes alguna otra cosa —dijo Dinah guardando su labor.

—Sí. Quiero que hagas otra cosa, que tomes el té. Ya está preparado, y usted, Adam, tome también una taza si no tiene demasiada prisa.

—Sí, tomaré una taza, muchas gracias, y luego acompañaré a Dinah. Tengo que ir a casa directamente, pues he de anotar unos cálculos de maderas.

—¡Cómo, Adam! ¿Usted por aquí? —exclamó el señor Poyser entrando sudoroso y en mangas de camisa, seguido por sus dos hijos, que se le parecían tanto como dos elefantitos se parecen a sus mayores—. ¿Cómo es que le vemos a esta hora?

—He venido con un encargo de mi madre. Vuelve a sentir su antigua molestia y desea que Dinah vaya a hacerle un poco de compañía.

—Bueno. No tenemos inconveniente en cedérsela un poco, para el bien de su madre —dijo el señor Poyser—. Pero no le permitiremos salir de aquí más que para irse con su marido.

—¿Con su marido? —exclamó Marty, que estaba en el periodo más prosaico de las mentes juveniles—. Dinah no tiene marido.

—¿Dejarla salir? —exclamó la señora Poyser mientras ponía una torta en la mesa y se sentaba luego para servir el té—. Convendrá no dejarla salir ni siquiera con su marido. Vamos a ver, Tommy, ¿qué haces con la muñeca de tu hermana? Déjala enseguida y no la molestes. Si te portas mal, no probarás la torta.

Tommy, con verdadera simpatía fraternal, se divertía en levantar la camisa de la muñeca de Totty, exponiendo su cuerpo roto a la burla de todo el mundo, y esta indignidad hizo enojar en extremo a Totty.

—¿Qué crees que me está diciendo Dinah desde que acabamos de comer? —preguntó la señora Poyser a su marido.

—Soy muy mal adivino —contestó éste.

—Que quiere volver a Snowfield para trabajar en la fábrica y morirse de hambre como antes, y como si no tuviese parientes ni amigos.

El señor Poyser no encontró palabras para expresar su extraordinario asombro. Se limitó a mirar a su esposa y a Dinah, quien se había sentado al lado de Totty para proteger a la niña de las jugarretas de su hermano y en aquel momento preparaba el té de la niña. Si el señor Poyser hubiera sido hombre capaz de fijarse en ello, habría notado un cambio en Dinah, porque ésta no solía mudar de color y en aquel instante tenía las mejillas coloradas. El señor Poyser la encontró más bonita que nunca, aunque su rubor apenas fue un leve tono rosado que se esparció por su rostro. Tal vez se debiera a que su tío la miraba con tanta fijeza, pero es imposible saberlo, pues en aquel momento Adam decía con sorpresa:

—Yo esperaba que Dinah seguiría viviendo entre nosotros durante toda su vida e incluso me figuraba que había abandonado la idea de volver a Snowfield.

—Todo el mundo creería eso con razón —contestó la señora Poyser—, pero hay que ser metodista para saber de lo que es capaz una metodista. Es como el que quiere averiguar lo que persiguen los murciélagos al vuelo.

—¿Qué te hemos hecho, Dinah, para que quieras dejarnos? —preguntó el señor Poyser con la taza de té en la mano—. Eso es casi faltar a tu palabra, porque tu tía creía que seguirías viviendo entre nosotros.

—No, tío —contestó Dinah esforzándose en aparentar tranquilidad—. Al llegar ya dije que estaría algún tiempo entre vosotros, para consolar a mi tía.

—¿Y quién te ha dicho que has dejado de ser un consuelo para mí? —exclamó la señora Poyser—. Si no quieres seguir en mi compañía, mejor sería que no hubieses venido. Así no te echaría de menos.

—No debes decir eso —objetó el señor Poyser—, porque la verdad es que hemos de estarle agradecidos, tanto si quiere marcharse como si no. Pero creo que haría mal dejando una buena casa como ésta para ir a una comarca donde la tierra no vale nada.

—Pues precisamente por eso se quiere ir, y ésta es la razón que da —dijo la señora Poyser—. Siempre dice que este país es demasiado agradable, que aquí come más de lo debido y que la gente no es bastante pobre. Quiere marcharse la semana próxima y no hace caso de mis palabras. Con esta gente suave y apacible siempre ocurre lo mismo. Por mucho que se diga no se dejan convencer. Ahora, que yo creo que el ser tan testarudo no está de acuerdo con la religión. ¿No le parece, Adam?

Este comprendió que Dinah estaba más apurada que nunca y, deseando acudir en su auxilio, dijo mirándola con afecto:

—Por mi parte, nunca encuentro mal nada de lo que hace Dinah. Creo que sus ideas son siempre

mejores que cuanto podemos imaginamos. Le agradecería mucho que se quedase entre nosotros, pero no deseo contradecirla acerca del particular. Todos le debemos mucho para obrar así.

Como ocurre con frecuencia, estas palabras, encaminadas a favorecer a Dinah, fueron las que ella sintió más. Acudieron tan rápidas las lágrimas a sus ojos que no pudo ocultarlas; y se puso apresuradamente en pie, dando a entender que iba en busca del gorro.

—¿Por qué llora Dinah, madre? —preguntó Totty.

—Has ido demasiado lejos —dijo el señor Poyser a su mujer—. No tenemos derecho de impedirle que haga lo que quiera. Por más que te enojes conmigo, yo no diré ni una sola palabra contra ella.

—Pues tengo razón al decirle lo que le he dicho, porque de lo contrario me habría callado. Ten presente que yo la quiero y que estoy acostumbrada a que viva en esta casa. Y en cuanto se marche, me sentiré tan incómoda como una oveja recién esquilada. Además, no me parece bien que abandone una parroquia donde tanto se la quiere. El señor Irwine la trata como si fuese una señora, a pesar de pertenecer al metodismo y de la manía que le ha dado de andar predicando por ahí. Y Dios me perdone si hago mal en hablar así.

—Sí —contestó el señor Poyser en tono de broma—, pero cuéntale ahora a Adam lo que el señor Irwine te dijo un día. Mi mujer, Adam, dijo en cierta ocasión que el predicar era el único defecto que encontraba en Dinah, y el señor Irwine le contestó: «No debe usted tenerle mala voluntad por ello, porque la pobre no tiene ningún marido a quien predicar. Usted misma, estoy seguro de que predica más de un sermón al señor Poyser». Bien te contestó el párroco. Y cuando se lo conté a Barde Massey, también se echó a reír.

—Sí. Cuando los hombres pierden el tiempo mirándose unos a otros y con la pipa en la boca, siempre tienen ganas de bromear a costa de las pobres mujeres —dijo la señora Poyser—. Dale cuerda a Barde Massey y ya verás las tonterías que suelta por aquella boca. Mira, Totty, sube a ver qué hace la prima Dinah y dale un beso.

Dio este encargo a Totty para impedir que ésta se echara a llorar, pues Tommy, que ya no temía quedarse sin torta, se dedicaba a hacer muecas a su hermanita, cosa que a ella le parecía un grave insulto.

—Creo que está muy ocupado ahora, ¿verdad, Adam? —preguntó el señor Poyser—. Burge está cada día peor de su asma y haría bien no yendo de un lado a otro, como de costumbre.

—La verdad es que tenemos mucho trabajo, pues no sólo hay las reparaciones de la propiedad, sino que tenemos que construir algunas casas en Treddleston.

—Apostaría un penique a que la casa nueva que está construyendo Burge en su terreno es para él y para su hija Mary —observó el señor Poyser—. Pronto dejará los negocios y querrá que se encargue usted de todo, pagándole un tanto cada año. Espero que pronto le veremos viviendo en la colina.

—A decir verdad —contestó Adam—, me gustaría mucho tener todo el negocio en mis manos, y no porque quiera ganar más dinero, ya que ahora, con el que gano, puedo ahorrar, pues sólo hemos de mantenernos nosotros dos y mi madre. Pero me gustaría hacer lo que me pareciera mejor, y haría muchas cosas que ahora no puedo intentar siquiera.

—¿Se lleva bien con el nuevo administrador? —preguntó el señor Poyser.

—Sí, es un buen hombre que entiende de agricultura y de la cría de ganado, y además está desecando las tierras pantanosas; en fin, cumple bien con sus obligaciones. Un día debería ir por Stonyshire para ver los cambios que están haciendo allí. Pero no sabe nada de construcción. Es muy difícil encontrar un hombre que tenga nociones generales de todo, pues la mayoría no piensa más que en su propia especialidad. No obstante, el señor Irwine tiene más conocimientos de construcción que un arquitecto, porque éstos, que son personas distinguidas, no saben a veces dónde poner una chimenea. Yo opino que un hombre práctico, que tenga un poco de gusto, es el mejor arquitecto para las construcciones sencillas, y cuando yo mismo he hecho los planos, disfruto realmente en construir una casa.

El señor Poyser escuchaba con interés y admiración las palabras de Adam, pero tal vez le recordaron que su granero necesitaba su cuidado, porque en cuanto hubo dejado de hablar se puso en pie y dijo:

—Bueno, amigo mío. Yo me despido de usted porque he de volver al granero.

Adam se levantó también al ver que entraba Dinah con el gorro puesto y el cesto en la mano, precedida de Totty.

—Veo que ya está dispuesta, Dinah, y, por consiguiente, podemos marcharnos, porque cuanto antes llegue a casa, mejor será —dijo Adam.

—Madre —exclamó Totty con su aguda vocecita—. Dinah estaba rezando y al mismo tiempo lloraba.

—Calla —dijo su madre—. Las niñas no deben hablar de estas cosas.

Entonces su padre, riéndose, subió a Totty a la mesa de servicio para que le diese un beso. Ya se advierte que el matrimonio Poyser no seguía principio alguno para la educación de los niños.

—Vuelve mañana si la señora Bede no te necesita, Dinah —dijo la señora Poyser—. Pero ya sabes que

puedes quedarte el tiempo que sea necesario, en caso de que esté enferma.

Dinah y Adam se despidieron y luego salieron los dos juntos de Hall Farm.

L

En la casita

Al salir al camino, Adam no ofreció su brazo a Dinah. Aún no lo había hecho nunca, a pesar de la frecuencia con que paseaban juntos, porque había observado que a la joven no le gustaba dar el brazo a Seth y por eso llegó a suponer que no le resultaba agradable.

—¿De modo, Dinah, que no sería feliz estableciéndose definitivamente en Hall Farm? —preguntó Adam con un interés fraternal que excluía todo sentimiento personal—. Es una lástima, en vista de lo mucho que le quieren.

—Ya sabe, Adam, que les quiero y me interesa mucho su bienestar, pero en la actualidad no me necesitan; se ha aliviado ya mucho su tristeza y comprendo que debo volver a mi antiguo trabajo, el cual me proporciona un bienestar que he echado de menos últimamente, en medio de la abundancia. Comprendo que en vano queremos huir de la tarea que nos señala Dios, cuando deseamos encontrar mayor bendición para nuestras almas, como si quisiéramos elegir por nosotros mismos el lugar en que sentiremos con mayor plenitud la presencia divina, en vez de buscarla del único modo que puede hallarse, o sea con amorosa obediencia. Ahora creo tener una prueba suficiente de que mi trabajo está en otra parte, por lo menos durante algún tiempo. En los años venideros, si se debilitase la salud de mi tía o me necesitara por otra causa cualquiera, no tendría inconveniente en volver.

—Usted sabe lo que le conviene, Dinah —contestó Adam—. No creo que se opusiera a los deseos de ellos, que tanto le quieren, sin apoyarse en muy buenas razones. No tengo derecho a decir que eso me pesa, pues de sobra le consta cuáles son mis motivos para considerarla muy por encima de todos mis amigos. Y si el cielo hubiese ordenado que fuese mi hermana y viviese con nosotros toda la vida, yo lo habría considerado la mayor de las bendiciones que pudiera cabernos. Pero Seth me ha dicho que no hay esperanza de que ocurra así, porque sus sentimientos son muy distintos; aunque comprendo que hago mal hablándole de eso.

Dinah no contestó y los dos siguieron andando en silencio, hasta que llegaron a un portillo de piedra. Adam pasó primero y se volvió para ofrecerle la mano, a fin de ayudarla a subir un escalón muy alto; de este modo no tuvo más remedio que mirarla a la cara. Le sorprendió que sus ojos grises, por lo común serios y afables a un tiempo, tuvieran esa mirada inquieta y brillante que suele acompañar a la agitación contenida, y el leve rubor de sus mejillas, que ya tenía al bajar la escalera de su casa, se le había acentuado. En realidad no parecía Dinah, sino una hermana suya. Adam se quedó muy sorprendido; por unos momentos hizo algunas conjeturas y luego dijo:

—Espero no haberle molestado por lo que acabo de decir. Quizás he hablado con demasiada franqueza. No deseo nada que a usted pueda desagradarle, y, si le parece bien, puede ir a vivir a cincuenta kilómetros de distancia. Pensaré en usted tanto como ahora, porque forma parte de unos recuerdos que no puedo alejar de mí.

¡Pobre Adam! Así disparatan los hombres. Dinah no contestó nada, pero luego dijo:

—¿Ha tenido noticias de ese pobre joven desde la última vez que hablamos de él?

Dinah siempre hablaba así al referirse a Arthur, y nunca olvidaba su aspecto cuando lo vio en la cárcel.

—Sí —contestó Adam—. El señor Irwine me leyó ayer parte de una de sus cartas. Asegura que pronto se firmará la paz, aunque nadie cree que dure mucho. Él, sin embargo, dice que no desea volver por aquí. Todavía se lo impide el estado de su corazón. Y es mejor para todos que continúe ausente. El señor Irwine cree que hace bien no viniendo. Es una carta muy triste. Pregunta por usted y por los Poyser, como siempre

hace. Una cosa hay en la carta que me impresionó mucho. «No puede figurarse lo viejo que me siento —dice—. Ya no me divierto. Y lo que más me estimula es saber que, al día siguiente, me espera una marcha o un combate».

—Es una naturaleza ardiente, como Esaú, que siempre me ha inspirado gran compasión —contestó Dinah—. Aquel encuentro entre los dos hermanos, en que Esaú se muestra tan afable y cariñoso, y Jacob tan tímido y desconfiado, a pesar de sentir el favor divino, es una cosa que siempre me ha conmovido profundamente. Y en varias ocasiones he sentido la tentación de decir que Jacob era hombre de espíritu mezquino. Pero éste es nuestro destino: hemos de aprender a ver el bien en medio de las cosas desagradables.

—¡Ah! —exclamó Adam—. A mí me gusta más leer lo que se cuenta de Moisés en el Antiguo Testamento. Se encargó de una empresa muy difícil y murió dejando que otros recogiesen los frutos de sus esfuerzos. El hombre debe tener valor para mirar así su vida y pensar en lo que ocurrirá después de su muerte. Una obra concreta es lo que perdura, aunque sólo se trate de un pavimento. Si se ejecuta bien, alguien sale beneficiado, aparte del mismo que lo ha hecho.

Ambos se alegraban de hablar de asuntos no personales, y de este modo continuaron hasta atravesar el puente del arroyo del Sauce.

—Aquí está Seth —dijo Adam—. Ya me figuraba que llegaría pronto a casa. ¿Está enterado de su proyectada marcha, Dinah?

—Sí, se la comuniqué el domingo pasado.

Adam recordó entonces que Seth había llegado muy triste a casa, el domingo por la mañana, circunstancia muy rara en él últimamente, porque la felicidad que le proporcionaba ver a Dinah cada semana parecía compensar el dolor de saber que no quería casarse con él. Aquella tarde tenía el mismo aire de satisfacción ensoñadora y benévola, hasta que se acercó Dinah y vio las huellas de las lágrimas en sus delicados párpados y pestañas. Dirigió una rápida mirada a su hermano, pero éste no sentía la misma emoción que Dinah, pues en su rostro se advertía la acostumbrada mirada tranquila e indiferente. Seth se esforzó en no dar a entender a Dinah que había observado aquella extraña expresión en su rostro, y así, se limitó a decir:

—Me alegro mucho de que haya venido, Dinah, porque nuestra madre ha pasado el día entero esperando su llegada. Sólo despertarse por la mañana se puso a hablar de usted.

Cuando entraron en la casita encontraron a Lisbeth sentada en su sillón, demasiado fatigada por la preparación de la cena a pesar de que tenía la costumbre de emprender este trabajo con mucha anticipación, para salir a la puerta, como de costumbre, en cuanto oía las pasos de cualquiera de sus hijos.

—Por fin has venido, hija mía —exclamó al ver a Dinah—. ¿Por qué has pasado tanto tiempo sin hacerme una visita?

—Veo, querida amiga mía —dijo Dinah tomándole la mano a la anciana—, que no está bien. De haberlo sabido antes me habría apresurado a venir.

—¿Y cómo querías saberlo si no vienes nunca? Mis hijos sólo saben lo que yo les digo, porque mientras me ven mover los brazos y los pies se figuran que estoy bien. De todos modos no estoy muy mal; sólo tengo un resfriado que me ha dejado un poco dolorida. Y mis hijos insisten en que tome a alguien para hacer mi trabajo. Llegan a marearme. Si tú vinieras a vivir conmigo, me dejarían en paz. Estoy segura de que los Poyser no te necesitan tanto como yo. Pero quítate el gorro y deja que te mire.

Dinah se apartó, pero Lisbeth la retuvo mientras ella se quitaba el gorro y luego contempló su rostro como se mira a un copo de nieve recientemente caído para renovar las antiguas impresiones de pureza y cariño.

—¿Qué te pasa? —preguntó Lisbeth asombrada—. ¿Por qué has llorado?

—He tenido un pequeño pesar que desaparecerá —contestó Dinah, que no quería suscitar las recriminaciones de Lisbeth diciéndole que se disponía a abandonar Hayslope—. Pronto se enterará, porque esta misma noche trataremos del asunto. Me quedaré con usted hasta mañana.

Lisbeth se apaciguó con esta promesa, y así tuvo toda la velada para hablar a solas con Dinah. En la casita había una nueva habitación, que habían construido dos años atrás en espera de que llegase otro habitante. Y allí se sentaba Adam cuando tenía que escribir o hacer algún plano. Seth fue también allí a pasar la tarde, pues comprendió que su madre quería verse a solas con Dinah.

En la casita hubo entonces dos escenas agradables. A un lado se veía a la anciana, dura, de facciones pronunciadas y anchos hombros, vestida con una chaqueta de color azul y un pañolón de color marrón, que volvía los ojos debilitados y ansiosos hacia el blanco rostro y la esbelta figura vestida de negro que iba de un lado a otro con gran actividad, o se sentaba junto al sillón de la anciana, estrechando su arrugada mano,

mientras la miraba y le hablaba en un lenguaje que Lisbeth comprendía mucho mejor que la Biblia o el libro de himnos. Aquella noche no quiso que le leyese nada, y rogó a Dinah que cerrase el libro, porque quería hablar y conocer el motivo de su llanto.

Al otro lado de la pared se hallaban los dos hermanos, tan parecidos entre sí a pesar de su diferencia. Adam tenía las cejas fruncidas, el cabello revuelto y el rostro moreno animado por un color vigoroso, mientras permanecía absorto en sus cálculos. Seth, cuyas facciones eran casi una copia de las de su hermano, aunque tenía el cabello castaño y los ojos azules y soñadores, miraba a veces hacia la ventana, cuando levantaba los ojos de un libro comprado recientemente; era la historia abreviada de *Madame Guyon*, escrita por Wesley, historia que maravillaba e interesaba mucho al joven.

—¿Puedo ayudarte en algo esta noche? —le preguntó a su hermano—. No quisiera hacer ruido en el taller.

—No, Seth —contestó Adam—. Nadie puede ayudarme en mi trabajo. Vale más que te entretengas leyendo.

Con frecuencia y cuando Seth no se daba cuenta de ello, Adam se interrumpía en su tarea de dibujar y miraba a su hermano con ojos risueños. Sabía que le gustaba tener la cabeza llena de ideas, que, sin embargo, no podía explicar, y aunque eso no le servía de nada, le hacía feliz. Por esta razón, hacía ya cosa de un año que Adam se mostraba cada vez más indulgente con Seth. Era una manifestación de la ternura originada por el dolor que aún sentía.

Luego, pensando en Dinah, Adam se dijo: «Es muy raro que esa muchacha no quiera a mi hermano, pues cualquiera al verle pensaría que es el hombre más indicado para ella. Pero, sin duda, su corazón se inclina a otras cosas. Es una de esas mujeres que no sienten deseo de tener un marido y unos hijos propios. Cree que entonces no pensaría más que en su propia vida, y como está acostumbrada a vivir solamente para los demás, no puede soportar la idea de que su corazón se cierre para ellos. Es muy distinta de las otras mujeres que conozco. Ya me di cuenta hace mucho tiempo. Cuando puede hacer un favor a alguien, se queda más satisfecha que nunca, y el matrimonio no hay duda de que le impediría dedicarse a la vida que ahora lleva. Y la verdad es que no tengo derecho de pensar que haría mejor en casarse con Seth, como si yo fuese más inteligente que ella o que Dios mismo, que la ha hecho tal como es, cuando le debo tantos favores y, como yo, otras muchas personas».

Estas ideas cruzaron por la mente de Adam al notar en el rostro de Dinah cierto disgusto cuando él le manifestó su pesar porque no se casara con Seth. Por eso se apresuró a decirle que hacía bien obrando como creyese conveniente, y le expresó su resignación al comprender que su marcha era inevitable. Estaba persuadido también de que a la joven le constaba con cuánto gusto la vería él continuamente, para hablar con ella y recordar cosas pasadas y dolorosas. Dinah pudo advertir su afecto y su respeto cuando Adam se mostró conforme con que se marchara y, sin embargo, el joven tenía el recelo de no haber hablado como convenía y que por esta razón Dinah no acabara de comprender sus sentimientos.

La joven debió de levantarse al día siguiente un poco antes de salir el sol, porque bajó la escalera a cosa de las cinco. Lo mismo hizo Seth, pues como Lisbeth se obstinaba en rehusar cualquier ayuda femenina en la casa, aprendió a hacerse útil para evitar determinadas faenas a su madre. Espero que no por eso el lector le creerá afeminado. Adam, por su parte, que se acostó muy tarde, dormía aún y no era fácil que le vieran antes de la hora del desayuno.

A pesar de la frecuencia con que Dinah había visitado a Lisbeth en el espacio de aquellos dieciocho meses, no había dormido en la casita desde la noche de la muerte de Mathias, es decir, desde la ocasión en que, como ya recordará el lector, Lisbeth alabó sus hábiles movimientos y hasta dio su aprobación al potaje. Durante tan largo intervalo Dinah había progresado mucho en sus conocimientos caseros, y aquella mañana, ayudada por Seth, limpió toda la casa y la ordenó de tal manera que incluso su tía Poyser habría quedado satisfecha. En la casita ya no reinaba un orden y una limpieza exquisitos, desde que el reumatismo de Lisbeth la había obligado a abandonar en gran parte sus hábitos de limpieza.

Cuando la casa quedó a su gusto, Dinah entró en la nueva habitación en que Adam había estado trabajando la noche anterior, para ver qué era preciso hacer allí. Abrió la ventana, dejó entrar el aire fresco de la mañana y el aroma de los rosales silvestres; los rayos del sol, casi horizontales, rodearon su pálido rostro y el cabello castaño, mientras ella empuñaba la larga escoba y barría cantando al mismo tiempo en voz baja uno de los himnos de Charles Wesley:

Rayo eterno de luz divina, fuente de inextinguible amor en quien brilla la gloria del Padre a través de la tierra y del cielo.

Jesús, descanso del fatigado caminante, hazme llevar tu fácil yugo, da firme paciencia a mi pecho e

infúndeme amor intachable y santo temor.

Apacigua mis pasiones violentas, tranquiliza mi tembloroso corazón; tu poder es mi fuerza y mi fortaleza, porque todo sirve a tu voluntad soberana.

Dejó a un lado la escoba y cogió un trapo para quitar el polvo; quien hubiese vivido en casa de la señora Poyser sabría cómo acostumbraba Dinah a limpiar, pues no perdonaba el menor rincón, aunque estuviese oculto. Sólo quedaba la mesa donde descansaban los papeles y las reglas de Adam, y Dinah se quedó indecisa, mirando aquellos objetos con timidez. Era bochornoso ver cuánto polvo había por allí, y mientras vacilaba, oyó unos pasos, que le parecieron de Seth, junto a la puerta abierta sus espaldas, y en voz alta preguntó:

—Dígame, Seth, ¿se enfada mucho su hermano si le revuelven los papeles?

—Mucho, cuando no los devuelven a su sitio —dijo una voz profunda que no era la de Seth.

Era como si Dinah hubiese tocado sin darse cuenta una cuerda muy tensa; se estremeció y, por un momento, no supo lo que le ocurría. Luego se dio cuenta de que se sonrojaba y no se atrevió a mirar a su alrededor; se quedó en silencio y muy apurada al ver que no era capaz de dar los buenos días con naturalidad. Adam, al ver que ella no se volvía para verle sonriente, temió que hubiese tomado en serio sus palabras y se acercó a la joven de un modo que ella no tuvo más remedio que mirarle.

—¿Acaso se figura que soy un hombre gruñón en mi casa? —dijo sonriente.

—No —contestó Dinah mirándole con timidez—. Nada de eso. Pero podía haberse enfadado si le hubiese revuelto los papeles.

Recuerde que incluso Moisés, que era el más apacible de los hombres, se encolerizaba en algunas ocasiones.

—Venga pues —dijo Adam mirándola con afecto—. Le ayudaré a quitar todo eso y a ponerlo en su sitio, y así no ocurrirá nada desagradable. Ya veo que, en cuanto a limpieza y orden, se parece cada día más a su tía.

Emprendieron juntos aquella tarea, pero Dinah no había recobrado bastante la serenidad para reírse de esta observación, y Adam la miraba con inquietud.

Se dijo que la joven parecía estar algo enfadada con él, y era evidente que no le demostraba la misma bondad y franqueza que otras veces. Quería que ella lo mirase y disfrutara tanto como él del trabajo que hacían, que más bien merecía el nombre de juego. Pero Dinah no le miró, cosa que resultaba fácil dada la estatura del joven, y cuando por fin ya no hubo más polvo que quitar y él no tuvo otra excusa para permanecer a su lado, se volvió hacia ella y le preguntó:

—¿Está disgustada conmigo, Dinah? Supongo que no habré hecho o dicho algo que pueda haberle molestado.

Esta pregunta la sorprendió, pero también la alivió, pues dio un nuevo curso a sus pensamientos. Lo miró entonces fijamente y casi con lágrimas contestó:

—¡Oh, no, Adam! ¿Cómo puede pensar eso?

—No tendría fuerzas para soportar su enfado —dijo Adam—, porque no sabe cuánto me importa su buena opinión de mí, Dinah. Eso es lo que quise decirle ayer al manifestarle mi conformidad por su marcha, si usted misma la cree conveniente. Es decir, que en caso de que le pareciese bien marcharse, yo me abstendría de manifestar mi disgusto. Aunque, por otra parte, sentiría tener que despedirme de usted.

—Sí, querido amigo —dijo la joven temblando aunque esforzándose en hablar con firmeza—. Sé que siente por mi un afecto fraternal y que, con frecuencia, nuestras almas se comunican con mucho cariño; pero en este instante experimento muchas sensaciones y no debe fijarse en mis sentimientos. Me siento llamada a abandonar por algún tiempo a mis parientes, pero eso es una prueba, porque la carne es débil.

Adam comprendió cuánto la apenaba tener que contestar.

—Seguramente la molesto hablando así, Dinah. Y por consiguiente, me callaré.

Aquella escena era muy sencilla, lector, pero es casi seguro que tú también habrás estado enamorado más de una vez, aunque no quieras confesárselo a tus amigos. De ser así, no pensarás ya que las palabras insignificantes, las miradas tímidas y los trémulos contactos son triviales, porque sabrás que esas cosas forman parte del lenguaje del alma.

LI

La mañana del domingo

El ligero ataque de reumatismo de Lisbeth no era lo bastante serio para justificar que Dinah pasara otra noche lejos de Hall Farm, y mucho menos cuando ya estaba decidida a dejar tan pronto a su tía; de modo que por la tarde era preciso despedirse.

—Hasta dentro de bastante tiempo —dijo Dinah, que ya había comunicado a Lisbeth su resolución.

—Pues entonces será para todo lo que me queda de vida, porque ya no volveré a verte —contestó la anciana—. Ten presente que no viviré mucho. Y cuando enferme para morir, tú no podrás venir a mi lado y acabaré la vida deseando en vano tu presencia.

Este fue el estribillo de sus quejumbrosas palabras de aquel día, porque como Adam no estaba en casa, ella no se esforzó por contener sus quejas. Repetidas veces atormentó a Dinah preguntándole por qué se marchaba y se negó a aceptar las razones de la joven. Además, se lamentaba con frecuencia de que no quisiera casarse con uno de sus hijos, para convertirse a su vez en su hija.

—Comprendo que no quieras a Seth —dijo—, porque no es bastante inteligente para ti, aunque es un muchacho muy bueno y que me ayuda mucho cuando estoy enferma. Además, es tan aficionado a la Biblia y a las cosas de la iglesia como tú. Me hago cargo de que desearías un hombre más inteligente, y en este caso te convendría Adam. Estoy segura de que él no tendría ningún inconveniente y de que llegaría a quererte si tú te lo propusieras. Él, sin embargo, es testarudo y no hay nadie capaz de obligarle a que desista de sus propósitos. No obstante, sería un buen marido para una mujer como tú.

Dinah trató de evitar las preguntas de Lisbeth, ocupándose en pequeños trabajos de la casa que la obligaban a ir de un lado a otro, y en cuanto Seth llegó por la tarde se puso el gorro para marcharse.

Dinah se despidió de muy mala gana, y se imaginó que en cuanto se marchara la pobre vieja se asomaría a la puerta para contemplarla hasta que se perdiese de vista.

—Dios esté con ellos —rogaba Dinah mientras volvía la cabeza para mirar hacia la casa desde el último portillo—. Que Dios les compense sus dolores con numerosas alegrías.

Lisbeth volvió por fin al interior de la casa y se sentó en el taller al lado de Seth, que estaba ocupado en ajustar algunas piezas de madera torneada traídas del pueblo para hacer una caja de labores que quería regalar a Dinah antes de su marcha.

—Podrás verla el domingo todavía —dijo la anciana—. Y si fueras bueno para algo, conseguirías que viniese a verme otra vez antes de marcharse a Snowfield.

—Ten presente, madre, que Dinah vendrá en cuanto haya una razón para hacerlo y que no habrá necesidad de que me moleste en convencerla. Por otra parte, estoy seguro de que cree que volver para despedirse de ti sólo serviría para causarte una emoción penosa.

—No se marcharía si Adam la quisiera y se casara con ella. Pero nada me sale bien —exclamó Lisbeth en tono de queja.

Seth interrumpió su trabajo y, ruborizándose un poco, miró a su madre.

—¡Cómo! ¿Te ha dado a entender ella algo acerca de eso? —preguntó en voz baja.

—No me ha dicho una palabra. Pero los hombres parecéis tontos y siempre necesitáis que se os digan las cosas, porque no sabéis comprender lo que pasa.

—Pero ¿por qué opinas así, madre? ¿Cómo se te ha ocurrido esa idea?

—Poco importa cómo se me ha ocurrido. Sé que ella le quiere y eso basta. Y él tal vez quisiera casarse con ella si estuviese enterado, pero nunca se le ocurrirá tal cosa si no se lo dice alguien.

La opinión de Lisbeth acerca de los sentimientos de Dinah no era cosa nueva para Seth, pero las últimas palabras le alarmaron, pues creyó que se disponía a abrir los ojos a su hermano. Él no estaba seguro de los sentimientos de Dinah, pero sí de los de Adam.

—No, madre —dijo por fin—. No debes decir una palabra de eso a Adam. Puesto que Dinah no te ha dicho nada, no tienes derecho a estar segura de sus sentimientos. No tengo la menor duda de que eso impresionaría mucho a mi hermano, que siente gratitud y afecto por Dinah, pero, en cambio, no creo que esté dispuesto a casarse con ella. Tampoco Dinah le querría por esposo, pues, a mi parecer, no tiene intención de casarse.

—Tú piensas así porque no te quiere a ti —exclamó Lisbeth impaciente—. Con quien no querrá casarse es contigo; lo menos que podrías hacer es alegrarte de que quisiera a tu hermano.

—Haces mal en pensar eso de mí, madre —contestó Seth resentido—. Tan contento estaría yo de tenerla por hermana como tú por hija. No me mueve el egoísmo, y me disgustará que vuelvas a hablarme de ese modo.

—Bueno, no te enfades si te digo cosas semejantes.

—Piensa, madre, que harías un flaco servicio a Dinah diciendo a Adam lo que imaginas, y las consecuencias podrían ser desagradables, porque si Adam no comparte esos sentimientos, se encontrará violento con ella. Y estoy seguro de que él no tiene esas intenciones.

—No me digas que estás seguro de eso, porque no sabes una palabra. ¿Para qué habrá ido con tanta frecuencia a casa de los Poyser, sino para ver a esa joven? Fíjate en que va allí más a menudo que antes. Quizá él mismo no se haya dado cuenta de su deseo de verla, pero la echará mucho de menos cuando se vaya. Y estoy segura de que no pensará en casarse si alguien no se lo dice. Si tú tuvieras algún cariño por tu madre se lo dirías y procurarías que Dinah no se marchara; para mí sería el único consuelo que puedo esperar en esta vida, antes de que me entierren junto a mi marido bajo el espino blanco.

—Haces mal en juzgarme así, madre. Pero yo obraría contra mi conciencia al asegurar, sin saberlo positivamente, cuáles son los sentimientos de Dinah. Además, creo que ofendería a Adam hablándole de matrimonio, y te aconsejo que no lo hagas tú. Puedes estar engañada con respecto a Dinah; a juzgar por lo que ella misma me dijo el domingo, estoy persuadido de que no quiere casarse.

—Siempre te gusta llevar la contraria. Si fuese algo que a mí no me agradase, no tardarías en hacerlo.

Dicho esto, Lisbeth se puso en pie y salió del taller, dejando a Seth muy preocupado de que su madre turbase los pensamientos de Adam hablándole de Dinah. Pero no tardó en consolarse, diciéndose que, a partir de lo ocurrido con Hetty, Lisbeth siempre se había manifestado muy reservada con Adam sobre los asuntos sentimentales; lo más probable era, pues, que no se atreviese a tratar de aquello y, aunque lo hiciese, Adam no le prestaría la menor atención.

Seth estaba en lo cierto al creer en la timidez de su madre, de modo que durante los tres días siguientes las ocasiones que se presentaron a la anciana para hablar con Adam fueron demasiado escasas y cortas para que se decidiese. En sus largas horas de soledad no hacía más que pensar en Dinah, y al fin, llegó a sentirse incapaz de contenerse por más tiempo. Pero el domingo por la mañana, cuando Seth se fue a la iglesia de Treddleston, se presentó la peligrosa oportunidad.

Aquél era para Lisbeth el rato más feliz de toda la semana; como en Hayslope no había servicio religioso hasta la tarde, Adam se quedaba en casa leyendo, ocupación que su madre no se atrevía a interrumpir. Además, solía estar ocupada en preparar una comida mejor que de costumbre para sus hijos, muchas veces para Adam y ella solos, porque Seth acostumbraba ausentarse durante todo el día; y el olor de la carne asada que se desprendía de la cocina, el tictac del reloj que parecía resonar de un modo distinto el día de fiesta, su querido Adam, sentado a corta distancia de ella y vestido con su mejor traje, sin ocuparse de nada importante, de modo que ella podía ir a acariciarle el cabello si quería, eran cosas que hacían feliz a Lisbeth durante la mañana del domingo.

El libro que Adam solía leer entonces era una gran Biblia con imágenes, y aquella mañana la puso frente él, en la blanca y redonda mesa de la cocina, pues a pesar del calor del fuego se había sentado allí sabiendo que a su madre le gustaba tenerlo cerca y que era el único día de la semana en que podía complacerla. Al lector le habría gustado mucho ver a Adam ocupado en leer la Biblia. Como nunca la abría en un día laborable, resultaba ser el libro del domingo, y para él constituía a la vez un tratado de historia, una colección de biografías y un tomo de poesías. Tenía una mano metida entre los botones de su chaleco y la otra dispuesta a volver las hojas; y en el curso de la mañana el lector habría podido observar muchos cambios en la expresión de su rostro. A veces sus labios se movían como para pronunciar las palabras que leía, si encontraba una oración apropiada para sí mismo, como, por ejemplo, las palabras que al morir pronunció Samuel dirigidas al pueblo; luego sus cejas se levantaban y temblaban un poco las comisuras de

los labios, animados por la compasión, cuando el viejo Isaac se encontraba con su hijo, cosa que le conmovía mucho; en otras ocasiones y mientras leía el Nuevo Testamento, aparecía una mirada solemne en su rostro y a veces meneaba la cabeza en silencioso asentimiento o levantaba la mano para dejarla caer de nuevo; y algunas mañanas, al leer los evangelios apócrifos, que le gustaban mucho, las palabras agudas del hijo de Sirach hacían asomar una sonrisa a sus labios y también le complacía observar ciertas diferencias en un escritor apócrifo, pues Adam, que era un buen feligrés, conocía muy bien los artículos de fe.

En los momentos que sus tareas la dejaban libre, Lisbeth se sentaba frente a su hijo y se quedaba observándole hasta que, por fin, no podía contenerse más e iba a hacerle una caricia para llamarle la atención. Aquella mañana Adam leía el Evangelio de San Mateo y Lisbeth estuvo unos momentos a su lado, acariciándole el cabello, más suave que de costumbre, y luego se quedó mirando la enorme página, maravillada por el misterio de las letras. Se sintió alentada a continuar las caricias, porque cuando se acercó, el joven se reclinó en el respaldo del sillón para mirarla con cariño y dijo:

—Esta mañana, madre, te veo muy animada y alegre. Gyp también quiere que le mire, pues se da cuenta de que te quiero más a ti.

Lisbeth permaneció en silencio; habría deseado decir tantas cosas. Luego el joven volvió la hoja y apareció un ángel sentado en una gran losa alejada del sepulcro. Este dibujo despertó una extraña asociación de ideas en Lisbeth, porque al ver a Dinah por primera vez se había acordado de ella. Y cuando Adam hubo dado vuelta a la hoja y levantado el libro para que ella pudiese contemplar bien el ángel, su madre exclamó:

—Es ella… ¡Es Dinah!

Adam sonrió y, mirando con mayor atención el rostro del ángel, exclamó:

—Se parece un poco, pero creo que Dinah es más bonita aún.

—Pues, si te parece tan bonita, ¿por qué no la quieres?

Adam la miró sorprendido y replicó:

—¿Acaso crees que no quiero a Dinah?

—No —replicó Lisbeth asustada de su propio valor, aunque comprendió que ahora que estaba roto el hielo debía continuar hablando—. ¡Vaya un cariño el que se siente por una persona a la que se deja marchar a cincuenta kilómetros de distancia! Si la quisieras bastante ella no se marcharía.

—Pero si ella quiere, yo no tengo el derecho de impedírselo —contestó Adam fijando la mirada en el libro, como si quisiera continuar la lectura, pues preveía ya una serie de quejas que no habían de conducir a nada.

Lisbeth volvió a sentarse frente a él, y dijo:

—Ella no se marcharía si tú pensases lo contrario.

—¿Lo contrario? ¿Qué quieres decir, madre? —preguntó Adam mirándola con cierta ansiedad.

—Pues, sencillamente, que no te fijas en nada y que no piensas más que en tu trabajo —dijo Lisbeth casi llorando—. No piensas en que no es posible seguir así toda tu vida, como si en vez de ser de carne y hueso fueses de madera. ¿Y qué harás cuando se haya muerto tu madre y nadie cuide de ti ni te prepare la comida?

—No comprendo adonde quieres ir a parar —dijo Adam algo molesto por los gemidos de su madre—. ¿Deseas algo de mí?

—Si tú quisieras, yo podría tener alguien que me acompañase y me consolase, y que me cuidara cuando estuviese enferma.

—¿Y quién tiene la culpa sino tú, madre, que no quieres tomar a una muchacha que te ayude? Si trabajas como lo haces es en contra de mi voluntad. Ahora ya podemos permitirnos eso y te lo he dicho bastantes veces. Si consintieras, todos estaríamos mejor.

—¿Y por qué quieres que meta en casa a una muchacha del pueblo o de Treddleston, a quien no haya visto en la vida? Antes preferiría meterme en el ataúd de una vez, sin esperar a que me encierren en él.

Adam guardó silencio y procuró continuar su lectura. Aquélla era la mayor severidad que podía demostrar a su madre en la mañana del domingo. Pero Lisbeth había ya avanzado demasiado para contenerse, y después de un minuto escaso de silencio, añadió:

—De sobra sabes a quién quisiera tener conmigo. Pocas son las personas a quienes hago llamar cuando las necesito. Tú mismo la has ido a buscar bastantes veces.

—Ya veo que te refieres a Dinah, madre —dijo Adam—; pero es inútil que te empeñes en lo imposible. Si Dinah estuviese dispuesta a quedarse en Hayslope, no por eso abandonaría la casa de su tía, donde la consideran como a una hija, aparte de que está más obligada con ellos que con nosotros. Si se hubiese casado con Seth ello habría sido una gran bendición para todos nosotros, pero ya sabes que, en esta vida, no

siempre las cosas vienen a medida de nuestro deseo. Por esta razón has de resignarte y conformarte a no tener a tu lado a esa joven.

—No puedo resignarme cuando es la mujer que te conviene, y nadie podrá convencerme de que Dios no la ha enviado a nuestro lado sino para que se case contigo. ¿Qué importa que sea metodista? Ya no se acordaría más de eso en cuanto os hubierais casado.

Adam se inclinó en el respaldo del sillón y miró a su madre. Ahora comprendía adonde quería llegar desde el principio de la conversación. Desde luego era un deseo poco razonable y además impracticable; pero de todos modos aquella idea le impresionó. Y enseguida comprendió que, ante todo, había de procurar que su madre no volviese a hablar del asunto.

—Madre —dijo con acento grave—, estás hablando sin saber lo que dices. No vuelvas a tratar de este asunto. Dinah no quiere casarse, porque su corazón la inclina a otro género de vida.

—Es natural que no quiera casarse —replicó Lisbeth con impaciencia—, cuando el hombre que le gusta no se resuelve a pedirle su mano. Ten la seguridad de que yo no me habría casado nunca con tu padre si él no me lo hubiese propuesto. En cuanto a Dinah, puedes estar seguro de que te quiere tanto como yo quise a mi pobre Thias.

La sangre tiñó las mejillas de Adam y, por unos momentos, no supo siquiera dónde estaba. Su madre y la cocina habían desaparecido para él y no pudo ver más que el rostro de Dinah vuelto hacia el suyo. Experimentó algo así como una resurrección de su muerta alegría, pero despertó rápidamente de aquel sueño, aunque el despertar fue helado y triste; habría cometido una tontería al creer en las palabras de su madre, que no tenía ninguna razón para hablar como lo hacía. Así pues, quiso expresar enérgicamente su incredulidad, aunque quizás lo hizo para obligar a su madre a que le proporcionase alguna prueba, suponiendo que existiese.

—¿Por qué dices esas cosas, madre, cuando no tienes motivos en que apoyarte? Sabes que no hay nada que te dé derecho a hablar como lo haces.

—Entonces, tampoco lo tendré para decir que ha cambiado el tiempo cuando lo observo por la mañana al levantarme. Ella no quiere a Seth por marido, ¿no es así? No quiere casarse con él, pero, en cambio, he observado que no te mira a ti del mismo modo que a Seth. Reacciona igual cuando se le acercan Seth o Gyp, pero se pone a temblar cuando te sientas a su lado a la hora del desayuno y fijas los ojos en ella. Tú te crees que tu madre no sabe nada, pero piensa que yo viví antes de que tú nacieras.

—De todos modos, creo que el temblor no significa amor —exclamó Adam con ansiedad.

—Pues ¿qué significa? Supongo que no será un modo de expresar el odio. Además ¿por qué no ha de quererte? ¿Dónde encontrará un hombre mejor y más inteligente que tú? Por otra parte, no tiene ninguna importancia el hecho de que sea metodista.

Adam se había metido las manos en los bolsillos y tenía los ojos fijos en el libro, aunque sin distinguir ninguna letra. Temblaba como un buscador de oro que, de pronto, descubre indicios de un buen yacimiento, pero que al mismo tiempo tiene la visión de los inconvenientes con que ha de tropezar. No podía decidirse a confiar en la perspicacia de su madre, pues quizás ella veía lo que deseaba ver. Y, sin embargo, ahora que se lo había hecho notar, recordó algunos detalles, muy débiles, que le parecían ser una confirmación de las palabras de la anciana.

Lisbeth observó la emoción de su hijo y continuó diciendo:

—Y en cuanto a ti, ya verás cómo te quedas cuando ella se haya marchado. La quieres más de lo que tú mismo sospechas, porque la sigues con la mirada del mismo modo que Gyp hace contigo.

Adam no pudo continuar sentado por más tiempo. Se levantó, descolgó el sombrero y salió al campo. Este se hallaba alumbrado por el sol de la primera parte del otoño, que ya no calienta tanto como el del verano, pero que alumbra casi con el mismo resplandor. Además, era un sol de domingo, más apacible y agradable para el trabajador, que dejaba algunas perlas del rocío en las telarañas que se hallaban a la sombra de los setos.

Adam necesitaba la influencia tranquilizadora de la naturaleza. Se asombraba de la rapidez con que se había apoderado de él la idea de que Dinah pudiese amarle, y lo dominó de tal manera que todos sus demás sentimientos desaparecieron ante el deseo impetuoso de convencerse de que era cierto. Era extraño que hasta aquel momento nunca cruzara por su imaginación la idea de que pudieran ser novios, y, sin embargo, ahora comprendió que existía la posibilidad; ya no tenía más duda ni vacilación con respecto a sus deseos, que el pájaro que vuela hacia la abertura por la que se cuelan los rayos del sol.

Y fueron los rayos del sol, precisamente, los que en aquella luminosa mañana de otoño apaciguaron su espíritu, pero no le dieron ninguna resignación para el caso de estar equivocado, sino que, más bien, le proporcionaron un suave aliento en sus esperanzas. El amor de ella era muy parecido a aquel sol apacible,

de tal manera que tanto el uno como el otro parecían la misma cosa a los ojos de Adam. Dinah estaba ligada a él a consecuencia de los tristes recuerdos de su primera pasión, recuerdos que ella no le inducía a echarlos al olvido, sino que con su amor les daba un nuevo carácter sagrado.

¿Y Seth? ¿Sería muy grande su dolor? Quizás no, porque últimamente parecía estar resignado y el buen muchacho era incapaz de sentir celos egoístas; nunca los tuvo del cariño que su madre testimoniaba a Adam. ¿Habría notado él también algo de lo que decía su madre? Adam deseaba saberlo, pues se fiaba más de las observaciones de Seth que de las de la anciana. Debía hablar con su hermano antes de ir a ver a Dinah, y después de tomar esta resolución, volvió a entrar en la casita y preguntó a su madre:

—¿Te ha dicho Seth algo sobre cuándo volvería? ¿Regresará a comer?

—Sí, hijo. Volverá, por casualidad, porque no ha ido a Treddleston.

—¿Sabes qué camino ha tomado? —preguntó Adam.

—No. Pero siempre se va al prado comunal. Mejor que yo conoces sus costumbres.

Adam deseaba ir al encuentro de Seth, pero tuvo que contentarse con pasear por los campos inmediatos, para descubrir su llegada lo antes posible. No tardaría más de una hora, porque Seth comparecería para comer, o sea a las doce. Adam no se sintió inclinado a entregarse de nuevo a la lectura de la Biblia, y así, se quedó mirando a lo lejos, junto al arroyo, pero en realidad no veía nada. Repetidas veces su visión fue interrumpida por la extrañeza y la fuerza de sus propios sentimientos, así como por la intensidad y la dulzura de aquel nuevo amor, igual que el artesano descubre, extrañado, la habilidad de que está dotado para el ejercicio de un arte que había abandonado por algún tiempo. ¿Cómo se explica que los poetas hayan dicho tantas cosas bellas acerca de nuestro primer amor y tan pocas respecto al último? ¿Acaso los primeros poemas son los mejores? ¿No es más lógico que los aventajen los que componen en la edad madura, cuando tienen una experiencia mayor y unos afectos más arraigados? La voz aflautada del joven tiene, sin duda, sus encantos; pero el hombre puede producir una música más rica y melodiosa.

Por fin apareció Seth a gran distancia y Adam se apresuró a ir a su encuentro. El primero se quedó sorprendido, comprendiendo que había ocurrido algo; pero en cuanto se aproximó Adam, su rostro le dio a entender que no era nada alarmante.

—¿Dónde has estado? —preguntó Adam.

—He ido al prado comunal —contestó Seth—. Dinah ha predicado ante un pequeño grupo de oyentes, en la casa de Brimstone, como le llaman. Son gente que apenas van a la iglesia, pero, en cambio, les gusta oír a Dinah. Ha glosado el versículo «No vengo a llamar a los justos, sino a los pecadores, para que se arrepientan». Y ha ocurrido una cosa muy curiosa. Casi todas las mujeres han llevado a sus hijos, pero hoy vi a un niño de tres o cuatro años, robusto y de cabello rizado, a quien no conocía. Al principio, y mientras nosotros cantábamos, hizo muchas travesuras; pero cuando nos sentamos y Dinah empezó a hablar, se quedó inmóvil como una estatua, mirando a Dinah con la boca abierta, y luego se alejó de su madre y fue a tirar de la falda de Dinah para llamarle la atención. Ella lo tomó y lo sentó en su regazo, sin dejar de hablar. A partir de aquel momento estuvo quietecito y acabó por dormirse, de modo que la madre, al verlo, se echó a llorar conmovida.

—Es una lástima que ella no quiera ser madre, puesto que le gustan tanto los chiquillos —observó Adam —. ¿Crees que aún está resuelta a no casarse, Seth? ¿Te parece que no hay nada que pueda obligarla a cambiar de opinión?

Seth advirtió algo raro en el rostro de Adam, y así, antes de contestar le dirigió una larga mirada.

—No puedo afirmar nada sobre eso —replicó—. Si te refieres a mí, te diré que he renunciado a toda esperanza, porque ella no quiere ser mi mujer. Me trata como un hermano, y ya es bastante.

—Pero ¿crees que puede querer a otro para casarse con él? —preguntó Adam con cierta timidez.

—Algunas veces he pensado en eso —contestó Seth tras una ligera vacilación—, pero Dinah no permitiría nunca que el amor la separase del camino que, según cree, Dios mismo le ha ordenado recorrer. Si le pareciese que la orden no procedía de Él no se dejaría arrastrar por ningún interés humano. Además, siempre ha dicho claramente que su destino en este mundo era cuidar de los demás sin pensar nunca en ella misma.

—Pero suponte —añadió Adam con vehemencia—, suponte que existiera un hombre capaz de dejarle hacer lo que quisiera, sin inmiscuirse en su conducta. Ella podría seguir ocupándose de sus actuales tareas, como si aún continuase soltera. Otras mujeres de su secta se han casado también, aunque es preciso confesar que no hay ninguna que se le parezca, pero, de todos modos, algunas han seguido predicando y cuidando a los enfermos y menesterosos. Por ejemplo, la señora Fletcher, de quien ella habla a veces.

Seth comprendió entonces el alcance de las palabras de su hermano. Se volvió hacia él, le apoyó la mano en el hombro y preguntó:

—¿Acaso quieres casarte con ella, hermano?

Adam le miró con expresión vacilante y replicó:

—¿Te disgustaría mucho que me quisiera más a mí que a ti?

—De ningún modo —contestó Seth con cordialidad—. ¿Cómo puedes figurarte tal cosa? ¿Acaso sentí tan poco tu dolor, que no pueda compartir tu alegría?

Hubo un corto silencio mientras seguían andando, y luego Seth dijo:

—Nunca sospeché que la quisieras por mujer.

—¿Crees inútil que piense en eso? ¿Qué te parece? —preguntó Adam—. Nuestra madre me ha hablado esta mañana y me ha hecho ver la verdad de mis sentimientos. Además, está segura de que Dinah me quiere y de que me aceptará con gusto. Sin embargo, temo que haya hablado sin motivo, y por eso quisiera que me dijeses si has notado algo.

—Es difícil hablar de eso, porque temo equivocarme. Además, no tengo derecho a interpretar los sentimientos de las personas, cuando ellas mismas no quieren manifestarlos. —Seth hizo una pausa y añadió —: Mejor sería que se lo preguntases. No se ofendió conmigo cuando le expresé mis sentimientos, y creo que tú tienes más derecho a hacerlo que yo mismo, aunque no pertenezcas a la Sociedad. Dinah, sin embargo, no aprueba las ideas exclusivistas de sus correligionarios y no se opone a que otras personas entren a formar parte de la Sociedad, siempre que sus sentimientos sean apropiados. Y sé que algunos de los hermanos de Treddleston están disgustados con ella por esta causa —concluyó.

—¿Dónde pasará el resto del día? —preguntó Adam.

—Dijo que hoy mismo se disponía a marcharse; éste es el último día que ha de pasar aquí, pero antes debe ir a leer la Biblia a los niños.

Adam no contestó, pero resolvió ir a verla aquella misma tarde y no acudir a la iglesia, porque allí no habría pensado más que en Dinah; por consiguiente, dejó que sus correligionarios cantasen sin él los acostumbrados himnos.

LII

Adam y Dinah

Serían las tres de la tarde cuando Adam entró en el patio de la granja y despertó a Alick y a los perros de su siesta dominguera. El pastor dijo que todo el mundo había ido a la iglesia a excepción de la joven señora, pues así llamaba a Dinah. Sus palabras no disgustaron a Adam, aunque «todo el mundo» comprendiese a Nancy, la muchacha encargada de la lechería, cuyas tareas eran a veces incompatibles con su asistencia a la iglesia.

En la casa reinaba el silencio; las puertas estaban cerradas y hasta las mismas piedras parecían experimentar la influencia de un día festivo. Adam oyó el suave goteo de la bomba, que era el único ruido perceptible, y luego llamó a la puerta con suavidad, según convenía dado el silencio reinante.

Se abrió la hoja de madera y apareció Dinah ante sus ojos, sonrojándose intensamente al ver a Adam a semejante hora del día, cuando, según le constaba, tenía la costumbre de hallarse en la iglesia. El día anterior él habría dicho sin ninguna dificultad «He venido a verle, Dinah, sabiendo que todos los demás están ausentes», pero hoy algo le impidió hablar así y, en silencio, le ofreció la mano. Ninguno de los dos habló, aunque habrían deseado hacerlo, mientras Adam entraba y se sentaban. Dinah ocupó la silla que acababa de abandonar y que estaba situada junto a la esquina de la mesa y cerca de la ventana. En la primera había un libro cerrado, porque la joven había estado sentada hasta entonces y contemplando el fuego del hogar. Adam tomó asiento frente a ella, en el sillón del señor Poyser.

—Espero que su madre no esté enferma otra vez —dijo Dinah después de recobrar el ánimo—. Seth me dijo que hoy se encontraba bien.

—En efecto, hoy está muy animada —contestó Adam satisfecho al advertir la turbación de Dinah en su presencia, aunque a su vez se sintió algo tímido.

—Ahora no hay nadie más en casa —dijo Dinah—, pero puede esperar. Sin duda algo le ha impedido ir a la iglesia.

—Sí —contestó Adam. Hizo una pausa y luego añadió—: Pensaba en usted. Por eso no he ido a la iglesia.

El joven observó que hacía esta confesión de un modo repentino y al mismo tiempo tímido, porque creyó que Dinah comprendería muy bien lo que quería decirle, pero la franqueza de esas palabras hizo que ella las interpretase como la expresión de un cariño fraternal por su próxima marcha, y con tranquilidad contestó:

—No tenga cuidado ni se inquiete demasiado por mí, Adam, porque en Snowfield tengo todo cuanto me hace falta. Además, mi conciencia está tranquila, porque al marcharme no ando en busca de mi propia satisfacción.

—Pero ¿y si las cosas fueran distintas, Dinah? —observó Adam con cierta indecisión—. ¿Si supiera algo que ahora ignora?

Dinah le miró con atención, pero él, en vez de continuar, tomó una silla y se sentó más cerca de la joven. Esta se asustó un poco y luego se concentró en el pasado. ¿Habría algo perteneciente a aquellos días desgraciados que ella ignoraba?

Adam la miró y le pareció muy dulce contemplar sus ojos, que entonces lo observaban con expresión interrogante, y, por un momento, olvidó lo que quería decir o la necesidad de explicarse.

—Dinah —exclamó de pronto cogiéndole las dos manos—, la amo con todo mi corazón y con toda mi alma. Después de Dios, que me crió, la amo a usted sobre todas las cosas.

Los labios de Dinah palidecieron hasta ponerse blancos como sus mejillas, y la joven tembló bajo el impulso de una alegría dolorosa. Sus manos estaban frías como la muerte entre las de Adam, y no pudo retirarlas porque él las retenía con fuerza.

—No me diga que no le es posible amarme, Dinah, ni que debemos separamos y pasar la vida lejos uno de otro…

Temblaban las lágrimas en los ojos de Dinah y empezaron a caer antes de que pudiera contestar. Luego lo hizo con voz baja y apacible.

—Sí, querido Adam. Hemos de someternos a otra voluntad, debemos separamos.

—No, si me quiere, Dinah. Si me ama no será preciso hacer tal cosa —exclamó Adam con apasionamiento—. Dígame…, dígame que me ama más que a un hermano.

Dinah confiaba demasiado en la divina voluntad para intentar siquiera alcanzar un fin valiéndose de algún subterfugio. Se reponía ya de la primera impresión y contempló a Adam con ojos sinceros al contestar:

—Sí, Adam, mi corazón se siente atraído hacia usted; y por mi propia voluntad, si no tuviese ningún motivo contrario, hallaría mi felicidad estando cerca de usted para dedicarle todos mis desvelos. Pero tiemblo al pensar que dejaría de regocijarme y de llorar con los demás, que no pensaría en la presencia divina y que no buscaría más amor que el suyo.

Adam no contestó enseguida. Ambos se miraron en doloroso silencio, porque la primera sensación del amor mutuo excluye todas las demás, pues quiere gozar del alma ella sola.

—Entonces, Dinah —dijo Adam por fin—, ¿cómo es posible que algo se oponga a que nos pertenezcamos uno a otro y vivamos juntos? ¿Quién puso este gran amor en nuestros corazones? ¿Existe algo más santo que esto? Piense en que podremos rogar a Dios que nos acompañe continuamente, para ayudamos uno a otro en todo lo que sea bueno. Yo nunca intentaría siquiera interponerme entre Dios y usted, ni le diría que no debía hacer esto o aquello. Estaría en libertad, como en la actualidad, de seguir los dictados de su conciencia.

—Sí, Adam —dijo Dinah—. Sé que el matrimonio es un estado de santidad para quienes son llamados a él y no tienen más propósitos que los de seguir la ley de Dios. Pero, desde mi infancia, he seguido otro camino; toda mi paz y toda mi alegría han procedido siempre de no vivir para mí, de no tener necesidades ni deseos propios para vivir sólo en Dios y para sus hijos, cuyas tristezas y alegrías me ha dado a conocer. Estos años pasados han sido una bendición para mí y comprendo que si prestara oídos a otra voz que me apartase de este camino volvería la espalda a la luz que siempre me ha alumbrado, y es posible que entonces las tinieblas se apoderasen de mí. No podríamos bendecimos mutuamente, Adam, si quedasen dudas en mi alma, y si, cuando ya fuese demasiado tarde, yo sintiera añoranza por esta existencia que ahora llevo.

—Pero si en su mente hubiese aparecido un nuevo sentimiento, Dinah, y si su amor se inclinase a vivir más cerca de mí que de los demás, creo que eso sería una señal evidente de que le convenía cambiar de vida. ¿Acaso el amor no justifica estas cosas?

—Tengo la mente, Adam, llena de estas ideas, porque desde que me ha dado a conocer su amor, lo que antes me parecía claro resulta oscuro y confuso. Ya hace algún tiempo que sentí mi corazón atraído hacia usted, y eso cuando el suyo no me pertenecía aún; mis pensamientos estaban fijos en usted, de modo que mi alma había perdido su libertad y yo me dejaba esclavizar por un afecto terrenal que me infundía los mayores temores acerca de lo que pudiese ser de mí. En los demás afectos siempre me he contentado con una pequeña recompensa o con ninguna, pero, en cambio, ahora mi corazón empezaba a desear un amor igual por parte suya. Y no tenía ninguna duda de que debería luchar contra eso, como si fuese una poderosa tentación. Y, por otra parte, me parecía evidente la orden de alejarme.

—Pero ahora, querida Dinah, ahora que ya sabe que la amo, más que usted a mí… todo es diferente y todo ha cambiado. Ya no pensará en alejarse, sino que se quedará para ser mi querida esposa, y yo daré gracias a Dios por haberme concedido esta nueva vida y sentiré una gratitud mucho mayor que en cualquier otra ocasión de mi existencia.

—Es muy duro para mí no poder atender sus suplicas y usted mismo comprenderá cuán desagradable es tener que obrar así, pero el caso es que me agobia un gran temor. Me parece como si usted me tendiera sus brazos y me llamara para vivir y ser feliz, al mismo tiempo que Jesús me mira y me señala a los pecadores y afligidos. Muchas veces, durante mi vida, he tenido esta visión en los momentos de soledad, y me ha asustado la idea de volverme dura y egoísta y de negarme a llevar con gusto la cruz del Redentor.

Dinah cerró los ojos y tuvo un ligero temblor.

—Adam —continuó diciendo—, usted no desea que busquemos nuestro bien por medio de una

infidelidad contra la luz que alumbra nuestras almas. Estoy segura de que no lo consideraría un bien. No tengo duda de que usted y yo estamos de acuerdo acerca de esto.

—En efecto, Dinah —dijo Adam con tristeza—. Nunca le obligaré a obrar contra su conciencia. Pero no puedo abandonar la esperanza de que llegue a pensar de otra manera. No creo que su amor por mí pudiera endurecerle el corazón; mi amor sólo sería una adición a lo que ya ha sido y no se privaría de ninguno de sus sentimientos, porque creo que ocurre lo mismo con el amor y la felicidad que con la tristeza, o sea que cuanto más sabemos de ellos, más comprendemos la vida de los demás y así podemos mostrarnos más compasivos y deseosos de ayudarles.

Dinah estaba silenciosa y tenía los ojos fijos, contemplando algo que sólo era visible para ella. Adam continuó defendiendo su causa, y añadió:

—Usted podría hacer casi lo mismo que ahora. Yo no le obligaría a acompañarme a la iglesia los domingos, sino que podría ir a donde quisiera, para enseñar a la gente; y aun cuando yo prefiero ir a la iglesia, nunca quisiera imponerle cosa alguna, como si pensara que mis palabras fuesen mejores para usted que el seguir su propia conciencia. Y, de igual modo, podría cuidar de los enfermos; incluso dispondría de más medios para proporcionarles alguna comodidad. En una palabra, que continuaría con sus amigos que la quieren, para ayudarles y ser una bendición para ellos.

Dinah guardó silencio durante un rato. Adam continuaba estrechándole las manos y la miraba con temblorosa ansiedad; ella volvió sus ojos graves y afectuosos y con voz triste le dijo:

—Hay mucha verdad en lo que dice, Adam, y existen numerosas servidoras de Dios que tienen mayor vigor que yo y que, gracias al cuidado del marido y de los hijos, observan que aumenta la capacidad de su corazón para amar al prójimo. Pero yo no creo que me ocurriese eso, porque desde que mi afecto se encaminó, de un modo desmedido, hacia usted, he gozado de menos paz y alegría en Dios, y hasta he sentido en mi corazón algo así como una división. Y ahora fíjese en mi situación, Adam; la vida que he llevado es como mi infancia; y si por un momento siento el deseo de seguir la voz que me llama a otra tierra desconocida, no tengo más remedio que temer que mi alma echara un día de menos la bendición que había olvidado. Y donde entra la duda, el amor no es perfecto. Esperaré a recibir más claras instrucciones y por ahora debo apartarme de usted y ambos hemos de sometemos por entero a la voluntad divina. Algunas veces nos vemos en la precisión de dejar al pie del altar nuestros afectos naturales y legítimos.

Adam no se atrevió a seguir insistiendo, porque Dinah no era mujer que mintiese ni se dejase dominar por sus caprichos. De todos modos, aquello era muy duro para él y se quedó mirando a la joven con expresión muy triste.

—Pero quizás quedará convencida y sentirá la inclinación de acercarse a mí para no separaros nunca más. ¿No le parece, Dinah?

—Hemos de someternos, Adam. Dentro de algún tiempo comprenderemos claramente cuál es nuestro deber, y puede ocurrir que cuando yo haya vuelto a mi antigua vida estos pensamientos y deseos se desvanezcan y se conviertan en cosas inexistentes. Entonces comprenderé que no debo pensar en el matrimonio. Mientras tanto debemos esperar.

—Dinah —exclamó Adam con tristeza—, seguro que no me ama como yo a usted, porque de lo contrario no sentiría esas dudas. Pero es natural que no sea así, porque yo no soy tan bueno como usted. En cuanto a mí, no dudo siquiera en que hago muy bien en amar a la mujer más excelente que Dios ha puesto ante mis ojos.

—No, Adam. Estoy segura de que mi amor por usted no es débil, porque mi corazón sólo desea oírle y verle, casi del mismo modo como un niño desea la protección y la ternura de las personas fuertes de quienes depende. Si sólo le quisiera de un modo superficial, no temería que llegase a apoderarse del culto de mi templo interior. Pero usted me dará fuerzas y no me impedirá nunca la obediencia a los mandatos de Dios.

—Salgamos al sol, Dinah, y vayamos a dar un paseo. Yo no diré una sola palabra que pueda molestarla.

Salieron y se encaminaron a los campos, donde podrían encontrarse con la familia a su regreso de la iglesia. Adam invitó a su compañera a que se apoyara en su brazo y ella obedeció. Este fue el único cambio que se habría podido observar en ellos desde la última vez que salieron a pasear juntos. Y ni la tristeza que sentía ante la próxima marcha de la joven, ni la misma incertidumbre de lo que resultaría de aquello, fue capaz de quitar a Adam la dulce convicción de que Dinah le amaba. Se prometió quedarse hasta la noche en Hall Farm, para estar junto a ella lo más posible.

—¡Caramba! Por ahí vienen Adam y Dinah —exclamó el señor Poyser mientras abría el portón más lejano del cercado—. Ya me extrañó no ver al muchacho en la iglesia. Escucha —añadió el buen Martin después de una ligera pausa—, a ver si adivinas lo que acaba de ocurrírseme.

—No será nada extraordinario, pues salta a la vista que Adam quiere a Dinah.

—¿Y no lo habías notado antes?

—¡Claro que sí! —replicó la señora Poyser que, en general, procuraba dárselas de muy ladina—. No soy de esas que cuando ven el gato en la lechería se extrañan de lo que ocurre luego.

—¿Y por qué no me dijiste nada?

—Ya sabes que no soy charlatana y que cuando no hay necesidad de hablar, me callo.

—Pero Dinah no le aceptará, ¿no te parece?

—Creo —contestó la señora Poyser sin tomar las necesarias precauciones contra una posible sorpresa— que esa muchacha no se casará con nadie y que si acaso lo hace será con un metodista y que, además, será cojo o estará inválido.

—Sin embargo, sería muy agradable que se casaran esos dos muchachos —dijo Martin volviendo la cabeza a un lado, como si le complaciera esta idea—. Y a ti, ¿no te gustaría?

—¡Ya lo creo! Entonces ella ya no se marcharía a Snowfield ni estaría a cincuenta kilómetros de distancia y yo no me vería obligada a valerme de los vecinos, que no tienen ningún parentesco conmigo, aparte de que me avergonzaría de que mi lechería tuviese el mismo aspecto que la de algunas mujeres que conozco. Por eso hay manteca de colores raros en el mercado. También me gustaría ver a esa pobre muchacha establecida como debe estar una mujer cristiana, en su propia casa y con una familia. Y yo le daría gran cantidad de lienzo y de plumas, porque, después de mis hijos, es la persona que más quiero en el mundo. Además, cuando está en casa, me siento muy tranquila.

—¡Dinah! —gritó Tommy echando a correr a su encuentro—. Mi madre acaba de decir que no querrás casarte más que con un metodista cojo. Si es así, eres muy tonta —añadió cogiendo a Dinah con ambas manos y empezando a bailar a su lado tontamente.

—Le hemos echado de menos en la iglesia, Adam —dijo el señor Poyser—. ¿Cómo ha sido eso?

—Quería ver a Dinah, porque ya sabe que se marcha muy pronto —contestó el joven.

—¡Ah, querido amigo! ¿No será capaz de persuadirla de que se quede? Búsquele un buen marido en la parroquia. Si hace eso le perdonaremos que no vaya a la iglesia. De todos modos, no se marchará antes de la cena de la cosecha, que daremos el miércoles; usted está invitado. Asistirán Barde Massey y también Craig. No lo olvide y venga a las siete, porque mi mujer no quiere que se retrase nadie.

—Sí —contestó Adam—. Si puedo, vendré, aunque casi nunca estoy seguro de lo que podré hacer unos días más tarde, porque a veces me retiene el trabajo más de lo que espero. ¿Se quedará hasta el fin de semana, Dinah?

—Sí, sí —dijo el señor Poyser—. No la dejaremos marchar antes.

—No tiene ninguna prisa —observó la señora Poyser—, porque por allí apenas hay que comer.

Dinah sonrió, pero no hizo ninguna promesa de quedarse. Durante el resto del paseo siguieron hablando de otras cosas, entreteniéndose, a la luz del sol, para contemplar la bandada de ánades que picoteaban por entre las gavillas; también comentaron, con exclamaciones de asombro, la gran abundancia de frutos del viejo peral; Nancy y Molly se habían apresurado a volver a casa, una al lado de la otra, llevando cuidadosamente envueltos en sus pañuelos los libros de oraciones, en cuyas páginas apenas podían leer mucho más que las letras de gran tamaño y los «amén».

LIII

La cena de la cosecha

Cuando Adam se dirigía a su casa el miércoles por la tarde a eso de las seis, vio a alguna distancia la última carga de cebada que transportaban a la puerta del patio de Hall Farm y oyó los cánticos de la fiesta de la cosecha, elevándose y descendiendo como una ola. Cada vez más débiles y más musicales a causa de la distancia, llegaron hasta él las notas de las canciones, que murieron casi cuando se hallaba ya en el arroyo del Sauce. El sol poniente, que alumbraba las cimas de las montañas de Binton, convirtiendo las cabras en blancas manchas de luz, resplandecía también sobre las ventanas de la casita, haciéndolas brillar entre los tonos ambarinos o de amatista del paisaje. Aquello era más que suficiente para dar a Adam la impresión de que estaba en un gran templo y de que el lejano canto era casi sagrado.

«Es maravilloso —pensó— ver cómo estos sonidos penetran en el corazón de uno, como si fuesen una campana funeral, a pesar de que expresan uno de los tiempos más alegres del año y la época en que los hombres están más llenos de gratitud. Tal vez sea porque siempre resulta triste pensar en algo que ya ha pasado, y esto, en realidad, es una despedida de todas nuestras alegrías. Se parece a lo que siento por Dinah. Jamás me habría imaginado que su amor pudiese ser la mayor de las bendiciones de mi vida si lo que yo supuse una bendición no me hubiera sido arrancado violentamente, dejándome más necesitado que nunca y con mayor deseo de un consuelo más grande y mejor».

Esperaba volver a ver aquella noche a Dinah y obtener el permiso de acompañarla hasta Oakbourne; entonces le rogaría que fijase un plazo para que él pudiera ir a Snowfield para saber si también tenía que renunciar a su última esperanza.

El trabajo en casa, y después ponerse el traje nuevo, le ocupó hasta las siete, hora en que emprendió el camino hacia Hall Farm, dudando de si, a pesar de sus rápidos pasos, llegaría a tiempo para tomar la carne asada que se serviría después del pudín, pues la señora Poyser habría servido la cena con su característica puntualidad.

Cuando Adam penetró en la vivienda, percibió un gran ruido de cuchillos, de platos de peltre y de cubiletes de estaño, pero ninguna voz se oía por encima de este acompañamiento, porque como todos estaban ocupados en comer la carne asada, la seriedad de tal asunto impedía a los buenos labradores ocuparse de otra cosa, aun en el improbable caso de tener necesidad de comunicarse algo; y en cuanto al señor Poyser, que estaba a la cabecera de la mesa, tenía bastante quehacer cortando la carne para atender siquiera a la conversación de Barde Massey o del señor Craig.

—Aquí, Adam —dijo la señora Poyser, que estaba en pie vigilando a Molly y a Nancy en su papel de camareras—. Aquí tiene su sitio, entre el señor Massey y los niños. Ha sido una lástima que no llegase a tiempo, para ver el pudín entero.

Adam miró en torno de la mesa, buscando una cara femenina, pero Dinah no estaba allí. No se atrevió a preguntar por ella, y, además, su atención fue solicitada por los saludos, de modo que tuvo que contentarse con la esperanza de que Dinah estuviese en la casa, aunque poco inclinada a participar de la fiesta en la víspera de su marcha.

Aquella mesa ofrecía un espectáculo magnífico. A su cabecera estaba Martin Poyser, corpulento y con el rostro risueño, sirviendo la aromática carne a los criados y mostrándose muy complacido cuando volvían a presentarle los platos vacíos. Aunque comúnmente Martin tenía muy buen apetito, se olvidó aquella noche de comer la carne que tenía en el plato, porque resultaba en extremo agradable levantar los ojos de vez en cuando e interrumpir su tarea de servir para ver a los demás disfrutando de la cena; en efecto, casi todos

ellos, a excepción del día de Navidad y de los domingos, tomaban la comida fría y hecha de cualquier manera, sentados junto a unos setos, bebiendo la cerveza de la propia botella y de un modo más propio de los patos que de los bípedos humanos. Martin Poyser se figuraba débilmente el aroma que tales hombres debían de hallar en la carne asada y caliente y en la cerveza recién sacada del tonel. Por eso volvía la cabeza a un lado y guardaba silencio, dando un codazo a Barde Massey para que observara a Tom Tholer, el tonto del pueblo, mientras le servían la segunda ración de carne. El rostro del pobre hombre expresó la mayor delicia cuando le entregaron la segunda ración y sostenía el tenedor y el cuchillo en alto, como si fuesen sagrados cirios; pero su alegría era demasiado intensa para seguir expresándola. Y así, un momento después, emprendía el ataque de la carne con un ansia de lobo. El enorme cuerpo de Martin Poyser se estremecía de la risa, y se volvió hacia su mujer para ver si ésta había observado la pantomima de Tom; y por un momento, los dos esposos estuvieron mirándose muy satisfechos.

Tom Tholer era el favorito de todos en la granja y representaba en ella el papel de bufón, pues sus agudezas, no muy notables por cierto, servían, sin embargo, para divertir a aquella buena gente.

A excepción de Tom, Martin Poyser se enorgullecía de sus criados y de sus labradores, diciéndose que eran los mejores de todo el condado. Por ejemplo, allí estaba Kester Bale, el viejo del gorro de cuero y de la cara arrugada. En todo Loamshire no había otro que entendiese mejor que él los trabajos de una granja. Es cierto que el pobre andaba encorvado, pero era muy hábil y una excelente persona.

En el otro extremo de la mesa y frente a su amo estaba Alick, el jefe de los pastores, hombre de rostro enrojecido y de anchas espaldas, que no estaba en muy buenas relaciones con el viejo Kester. En realidad la conversación entre ambos hombres se limitaba a algún gruñido de vez en cuando, y era muy probable que no tuviesen distintas opiniones con respecto a los trabajos pastoriles o agrícolas. Además, Alick era hombre rudo, y tenía una expresión propia de *bull-dog*, pero, al mismo tiempo, era la personificación de la honradez, pues cuidaba los bienes de su amo como si fuesen propios. Timothy, el carretero, que era un hombre de muy buen carácter y que adoraba a los caballos, estaba algo resentido con Alick y pocas veces se hablaban o se miraban, ni aun cuando se veían ante una buena comida; pero como, por otra parte, solían demostrar los mismos sentimientos hacia los demás, es de creer que no por eso dejaban de ser amigos. Ya se advierte que el carácter bucólico en Hayslope no se parecía en nada al que han descrito algunos poetas. Tampoco era fácil descubrir una sonrisa en el rostro de los labradores, y no todos eran tan honrados como Alick. En aquella misma mesa, y entre los servidores del señor Poyser, estaba el enorme Ben Tholoway, fornido trillador a quien sorprendieron más de una vez en el acto de salir de la granja con los bolsillos llenos de grano; sin embargo su amo le había perdonado y continuaba dándole ocupación, porque los Tholoway habían trabajado siempre a las órdenes de los Poyser. Y el último representante de aquella familia comía entonces con la misma serenidad que si jamás hubiese cometido la menor indelicadeza, y como si las miradas de enojo que le dirigía Alick fuesen la mayor injusticia de este mundo.

Se terminó, por fin, la carne asada y poco después se retiró el mantel, dejando sitio para los jarros de cerveza coronados de espuma, así como para las grandes palmatorias de latón que contribuían a la brillantez de la escena. Iba a empezar la gran ceremonia de la noche, o sea la canción de la cosecha, en la que todos habían de tomar parte. Poco importaba que se cantara fuera de tono, porque lo principal era no quedarse con los labios cerrados.

En cuanto al origen de esta canción, ignoro si había llegado a su estado actual tal como salió del cerebro de un solo rapsoda o si fue perfeccionada por una sucesión de ellos. En aquel canto había, sin embargo, una unidad que me inclina a aceptar la primera hipótesis, aunque no ignoro que ésta podría deberse también a la homogeneidad mental de los antiguos labradores, tan distinta de nuestra mentalidad moderna. Algunos creerán quizá que en la primera cuarteta falta un verso, que los rapsodas posteriores sustituyeron por la repetición del primero, y otros, sin embargo, tal vez opinarán que esta repetición es felicísima y acaba de dar carácter a la composición. Al canto acompañaba una libación general. Durante la primera y la segunda cuarteta, que todos entonaron con voz fuerte, no se llenó ningún jarro.

A la salud de nuestro amo
fundador de la fiesta;
a la salud de nuestro amo
y de nuestra ama.
Que alcance prosperidad
en todo lo que emprenda,
porque todos somos sus servidores
y estamos a sus órdenes.

Pero inmediatamente antes de la tercera cuarteta, el coro empezó a golpear la mesa, produciendo un efecto de címbalos o tambores. Se llenó el jarro de Alick y éste lo vació antes de que cesara el coro.

Bebed, muchachos, bebed,
y procurad no derramar el líquido;
pues si lo hacéis tendréis que beber dos veces,
porque así lo quiere nuestro amo.

En cuanto Alick hubo dado pruebas de que tenía el pulso muy firme, llegó la vez al viejo Kester, que estaba a su derecha, y así sucesivamente hasta que cada uno de los invitados se hubo bebido el jarro de cerveza bajo el estímulo del coro.

Tom Saft, maliciosamente, derramó un poco de cerveza como por casualidad, pero la señora Poyser —con demasiado oficiosidad, según pensó él— intervino para evitar la aplicación del castigo.

Cualquiera que hubiese oído los gritos que invitaban a beber continuamente, se habría imaginado una escena distinta de la que ocurría en realidad, porque los comensales no estaban embriagados ni mucho menos, ya que en aquel momento observaban un antiguo rito, llevando a cabo una ceremonia respetable y solemne. Barde Massey, cuyo oído era muy sensible, había salido para ver qué tiempo hacía y no terminó su observación hasta que se apagaron los gritos de los invitados. Los muchachos y Totty se quedaron muy tristes después de eso, porque les había entusiasmado el ruido, y hasta la misma Totty, sentada en la rodilla de su padre, contribuyó al escándalo con su diminuto puño cerrado.

En cuanto Barde volvió a entrar en la sala, se manifestó el deseo general de que alguien cantase solo. Nancy declaró que Timothy el carretero conocía una canción muy bonita, y el señor Poyser le invitó a que la cantase. Él se excusó, algo avergonzado, pero fueron tantos los gritos generales y los codazos de Ben Tholoway, que el carretero, enojado, llegó a perder la paciencia y se negó a cantar.

En vista de ello invitaron a hacerlo a un muchacho joven llamado David, quien se sonrojó, se rió y se limpió la boca con la manga, como si se dispusiera a obedecer. Pero fue en vano, porque el lirismo de la noche estaba entonces en la bodega y no quería salir todavía.

Mientras tanto, la conversación que se sostenía en la cabecera de la mesa tomó un carácter político. El señor Craig se refería con frecuencia a este asunto, porque se jactaba de saber muchas cosas ignoradas.

—No leo los periódicos —dijo aquella noche—, aunque podría hacerlo si quisiera, ya que la señorita Lydia recibe muchos y enseguida los tira. Sin embargo, Mills se los lee de cabo a rabo, pero no por eso llega a enterarse de lo que dicen. Yo a veces le digo: «Estoy seguro, Mills, de que a pesar de todo lo que lee, no se entera de nada. Y voy a decirle lo que pasa. Usted se figura que el país marcha muy bien, pero mi opinión es que nos gobiernan personas bastante peores que nuestros enemigos. Preferiría que estuviese aquí Bonaparte, con todos los que le acompañan, porque, por lo menos, a esos franceses se les puede derribar con la misma facilidad que si fuesen ranas».

—Tengo entendido —observó el señor Poyser, que escuchaba con el mayor interés— que esa gente no prueba la carne en toda su vida.

—Y yo le digo a Mills —continuó el señor Craig—: «¿Se figura acaso que esos extranjeros nos harían la mitad del daño que hacen los ministros con su mal gobierno? Si el rey Jorge los despidiera a todos y gobernase en persona, las cosas marcharían bastante mejor. Yo, por mi parte, no comprendo por qué se necesita algo más que el rey y el Parlamento. Los ministros son los culpables de todo».

—Tiene mucha razón —replicó el señor Poyser, que escuchaba con atención mientras sostenía a Totty sobre una de sus rodillas—. Y en cuanto a esa paz —añadió el señor Poyser haciendo un gesto de duda y despidiendo una bocanada de humo entre una y otra frase—, no sé qué pensar de ella. La guerra es una cosa muy conveniente para el país, porque, de lo contrario, ¿cómo se podrían mantener los precios altos? Por otra parte, los franceses son mala gente y lo mejor que se puede hacer es combatirlos sin tregua.

—Tiene razón en parte, Poyser —replicó el señor Craig—, aunque yo no soy contrario a la paz. Podremos interrumpirla cuando nos convenga y, en cuanto a mí, no temo a Bonaparte, a pesar de lo inteligente que dicen que es. Esto es precisamente lo que decía hoy a Mills. El pobre no ve más que por los ojos de Bonaparte, aunque yo le dije más en tres minutos que todo lo que puede leer en los periódicos en un año. Y por eso le hice observar: «¿Soy un jardinero que entiende o no su oficio, Mills? Contésteme a eso». «No hay duda de que lo conoce, Craig», contestó. El pobre Mills no es ninguna mala persona, pero sí un poco tonto. «Bueno», le dije, «siempre me habla de la inteligencia de ese Bonaparte, pero ¿me serviría a mí de mucho ser un excelente jardinero si tuviese que trabajar en un cenegal?». «No», me contestó. «Pues bien, eso es lo que le pasa a Bonaparte. No niego que será todo lo inteligente que quiera, porque, según tengo

entendido, no es francés de nacimiento. Pero ¿de qué le sirve toda esa gente que le acompaña? ¿Qué puede hacer con ellos?».

El señor Craig hizo una pausa, dirigiendo a su interlocutor una mirada enfática después de aquel argumento socrático y, dando un fuerte puñetazo en la mesa, añadió:

—Lo cierto es, y muchos podrían atestiguarlo, que si en un regimiento francés faltase un hombre y para sustituirlo vistieran de uniforme a un gran mono, no sería posible distinguir a éste de los demás soldados.

—¡Caramba! —exclamó el señor Poyser impresionado por el alcance político de este hecho y por lo interesante de la anécdota zoológica.

—¡Vamos, Craig! —exclamó Adam—. Eso es demasiado fuerte. Usted no cree lo que dice, y es una tontería querer dar a entender que los franceses valen tan poco. El señor Irwine los ha visto en su propia tierra y dice que entre ellos hay hombres estupendos, y en cuanto a inteligencia y habilidad, no hay duda de que saben hacer cosas muy buenas. Es una tontería rebajar de este modo al enemigo, pues si fuesen tan insignificantes como asegura, ningún mérito tendrían Nelson y todos los demás por haberlos derrotado.

El señor Poyser se quedó indeciso ante aquella contradicción pues, por otra parte, no podía negar el testimonio del señor Irwine. Sin embargo, Craig era hombre listo y su opinión muy notable. No encontrando respuesta apropiada a las palabras de Adam, se limitó a beber un gran trago de cerveza y luego se quedó mirando su propia pierna, mientras que Barde Massey abandonó el hogar, junto al cual había estado fumando una pipa, e interrumpió el silencio diciendo:

—¿Por qué no fuiste a la iglesia el domingo, Adam? Contéstame a eso, tunante. La antífona salió bastante mal por tu ausencia. ¿Te propones acaso deshonrar a tu maestro en su ancianidad?

—No, señor Massey —contestó Adam—. El señor y la señora Poyser podrán decirle dónde estuve, pues no me hallaba en ninguna mala compañía.

—Se ha marchado, Adam, ya se ha marchado a Snowfield —dijo entonces el señor Poyser, recordando a Dinah por primera vez—. Creí que podría persuadirla de que se quedase, pero fue imposible impedir que se marchara ayer tarde. Mi mujer se quedó tan desalentada que hasta llegué a creer que no tendría ánimos para la fiesta de hoy.

La señora Poyser había recordado muchas veces a Dinah desde el momento en que llegó Adam, pero no tuvo ánimos para darle tan mala noticia.

—¡Cómo! —exclamó Barde enfadado—. ¿De modo que hay una mujer de por medio? En tal caso te abandono, Adam.

—Recuerde que habló muy bien de esa mujer, Barde —observó el señor Poyser—. No, no debe retractarse. Una vez dijo que las mujeres no serían tan desagradables si se pareciesen a Dinah.

—Sólo me refería a su voz, amigo mío. A su voz y nada más —contestó Barde—, porque cuando la oigo hablar, no tengo tentaciones de taparme los oídos con algodón en rama. En cuanto a lo demás, creo que será como las otras mujeres, que se figuran poder lograr que dos y dos son cinco si se empeñan en que así sea.

La señora Poyser no pudo contenerse e intervino:

—Cualquiera que le escuchase pensaría que los hombres son lo bastante listos para contar los granos de trigo que tiene un saco, con sólo acercarse a olerlo. Pero los pobres apenas son capaces de ver tres en un burro.

Martin Poyser se reía muy satisfecho y guiñó el ojo a Adam, como para darle a entender que al viejo maestro de escuela acababan de sentarle bien las costuras.

—Sí —replicó Barde con ironía—. Las mujeres son muy listas. Saben cómo termina una historia antes de que se la cuenten y hasta adivinan los pensamientos de un hombre mucho antes de que él mismo los conozca.

—Es muy natural —contestó la señora Poyser—, porque los hombres son tan torpes que sus propios pensamientos corren más que ellos, y tienen que agarrarlos por el rabo. Yo misma soy capaz de terminar una media mientras un hombre se dispone a hablar, y cuando, por fin, lo hace, acaba por soltar una tontería. Pero no niego que las mujeres sean tontas, porque Dios todopoderoso las crió para ser las parejas de los hombres.

—¡Vaya unas parejas! —replicó Barde—. En cuanto un hombre dice una palabra, su mujer se apresura a contradecirle. Si a él le gusta la carne caliente, ella le servirá tocino frío, y en cuanto él está alegre, ella empieza a gemir. Los hombres y las mujeres emparejan tan bien como las moscas borriqueras con los pobres asnos. Y las mujeres, como las moscas, tienen un aguijón venenoso que clavan a los pobres hombres.

—Sí —contestó la dueña de la casa—, a los hombres les gustan las mujeres tontas y bobaliconas, que todo lo toman con calma y que, incluso, dan las gracias cuando reciben una coz. Esto es lo que les gusta a

los hombres. Quieren tener una tonta a su lado que admita sin cesar su sabiduría. Pero algunos se admiran a sí mismos, y es por eso que hay tantos solterones.

—Escuche, Craig —dijo el señor Poyser en broma—, cásese cuanto antes, para que no le llamen solterón. Ya ve lo que piensan las mujeres de usted.

—¡Bah! —contestó el señor Craig deseoso de reconciliarse con la señora Poyser—. A mí me gustan mucho las mujeres inteligentes y que saben gobernar bien su casa.

—Hace mal en hablar así, Craig —observó Barde—. Usted mismo juzga sus plantas por su utilidad. No estima las matas de guisantes por sus raíces ni las zanahorias por sus flores. Sin embargo, así hay que elegir a las mujeres, porque su inteligencia está siempre oculta y luego apenas sirven para nada. Sin embargo, huelen bien y tienen un bonito aspecto.

La señora Poyser se disponía a contestar airada a esta observación, pero en aquel momento la atención general se fijó en un extremo de la mesa, donde algunos de los comensales empezaron a cantar a coro, y tan ensordecedor llegó a ser el ruido, que Barde Massey dejó la pipa sobre la mesa y se tapó los oídos con los dedos, mientras que Adam, que hacía bastante rato que deseaba marcharse, desde que se enteró de la ausencia de Dinah, se levantaba y se disponía a despedirse.

—Saldré contigo, muchacho —dijo Barde—. Me marcharé para no quedarme sordo.

—Pues yo le acompañaré hasta su casa —contestó Adam.

—Eso es, y de paso podremos charlar un rato, porque ahora apenas te dejas ver.

—No os marchéis —exclamó Martin Poyser—. Pronto se irán todos, porque mi mujer siempre da por terminada la fiesta a las diez.

Pero como Adam se mostró resuelto, dieron las buenas noches y los dos salieron juntos.

—Esa tonta de Vixen debe de estar gimiendo en casa en espera de mi regreso —dijo Bartle—. Nunca la traigo a esta casa, para que la señora Poyser no le dé mal de ojo y la pobre se quede coja para toda la vida.

—Pues yo no tengo nunca necesidad de ordenar a Gyp que se vuelva —observó Adam riéndose—. Ya lo hace por sí solo sin que se lo mande en cuanto nota que vengo aquí.

—Esa mujer es terrible —dijo Bartle—. Parece que esté hecha de agujas. En cambio, Martin es muy simpático. Sin embargo, le gustan mucho las agujas y el pobre se ha convertido en un acerico.

—A pesar de todo es una mujer leal y buena —dijo Adam—. Se indigna cuando ve entrar algún perro en su casa, pero si dependiesen de ella no los dejaría sin comer. Y si tiene una lengua que corta, posee, en cambio, muy buen corazón. La he visto en momentos difíciles y sé que es una de esas mujeres que valen mucho más que sus palabras.

—No te diré yo que esa manzana no esté sana en su interior, pero me da dentera —contestó Bartle Massey.

LIV

El encuentro en la colina

Adam comprendió perfectamente el apresuramiento de Dinah y más bien le dio esperanza que desaliento. Sin duda ella temía que la inclinación que sentía hacia el joven le impidiese obedecer la voz interior que le ordenaba alejarse.

«Me gustaría haberle rogado que me escribiese —pensó—, aunque eso tal vez le habría causado cierta inquietud. La pobre necesita gozar de un poco de tranquilidad y yo no tengo derecho a estar impaciente o a molestarla con mis deseos. Ya me ha comunicado cuáles son sus sentimientos y no es mujer que sepa fingir. Por consiguiente, esperaré con paciencia».

Esta fue la juiciosa resolución de Adam y le fue bien durante las dos o tres semanas en las que pudo alimentar sus recuerdos con la confesión de Dinah de aquel domingo por la tarde. Son extremadamente alentadoras las primeras palabras de amor. Pero hacia mediados de octubre su resolución empezó a flaquear un poco y ofreció algunos síntomas de cansancio. Las semanas eran muy largas; la joven había tenido ya más tiempo del necesario para acabar de decidirse. Por mucho que diga una mujer, después de haber confesado a un hombre que corresponde a su pasión, él se queda tan satisfecho de aquel primer sorbo de felicidad ofrecido por ella que ya no piensa más que en saborear el segundo. Al alejarse de ella pisa la tierra con ágiles pasos y no da ninguna importancia a todas las dificultades. Pronto, sin embargo, desaparece aquel entusiasmo, la tristeza se apodera de él y la posibilidad de revivir aquellos momentos ya no llena. Adam no estaba ya tan confiado como antes y empezó a temer que quizás la antigua vida de Dinah se habría apoderado por completo de ella y ya no le sería posible el triunfo. De no ser así, la joven podría haberle escrito para darle algún consuelo, pero no parecía sino que ella quisiese hacerle perder toda esperanza. A medida que se desvanecía la confianza de Adam, desaparecía con ella su paciencia y creyó conveniente escribir a Dinah, para que no le dejase en la incertidumbre más tiempo del que fuese necesario. Una noche se acostó más tarde para escribir una carta, pero a la mañana siguiente la quemó, temeroso del resultado. Sería peor recibir una respuesta negativa por carta que verbal, porque la presencia de la joven le reconciliaría con su decisión.

Adam deseaba desesperadamente ver a Dinah, y cuando tal impulso llega a ese grado, un enamorado se siente inclinado a satisfacerlo, aunque para ello tenga que jugarse su porvenir.

¿Qué mal podría resultar de su viaje a Snowfield? Dinah no se disgustaría con él, porque no se lo había prohibido, y quizás le estuviera aguardando y todo. El segundo domingo de octubre el proyecto era tan acertado a los ojos de Adam que, sin esperar más, emprendió el viaje a Snowfield, aunque aquella vez fue a caballo, porque disponía de poco tiempo y pidió prestado el excelente jaco de Jonathan Burge.

¡Cuántos recuerdos le acompañaron en su viaje! Desde la primera vez que fue a Snowfield había ido con frecuencia a Oakbourne, pero más allá de esta población las grandes paredes de piedra gris, el terreno agrietado y los raquíticos árboles parecían referirle de nuevo la historia de aquel penoso pasado que tan bien recordaba. Mas ningún suceso nos parece siempre igual, después de haber trascurrido algún tiempo, o, mejor dicho, en nosotros está la diferencia de interpretación, de modo que Adam atravesaba aquella mañana la desolada región inmerso en nuevos pensamientos que le presentaban de un modo distinto aquella penosa historia.

Quien se alegra del mal de otros tiempos por el hecho de que haya acarreado desgracias a otra persona y sea, para nosotros mismos, una fuente de felicidad, da pruebas de tener un espíritu mezquino, egoísta y hasta blasfemo. Adam nunca cesaba de llorar aquella desgracia que tanta pena le ocasionó y no se alegraba

de le que hubiese podido corresponder a otro. En cambio, no es innoble decimos que la mayor comprensión que nos proporciona un sufrimiento personal, merece el dolor que nos trajo, y esto, precisamente, era lo que se decía Adam aquella mañana mientras iba recordando el pasado. Sus sentimientos con respecto a Dinah, la esperanza de pasar la vida en su compañía, fueron el objeto distante e invisible hacia el cual emprendió el viaje dieciocho meses atrás al ir por primera vez a Snowfield. A pesar de que su amor por Hetty fue tierno y profundo, tanto que nunca podría desarraigarlo de su alma, el que ahora tenía por Dinah era aún más precioso para él, pues lo sentía de un modo más pleno gracias al desarrollo de sus sentimientos ocasionado por aquel profundo dolor. Se decía que le parecía sentir nuevas fuerzas para amarla y para comprender el amor de ella, y que experimentaba una especie de valor gracias a la confianza que le proporcionaba el amor de la joven.

Eran más de las dos de la tarde cuando Adam llegó a la población gris que se extendía por la ladera de la montaña, y miró con atención hacia el valle interior en busca de la vieja casa inmediata al feo molino rojo. Gracias a la suave luz del mes de octubre, la escena era más agradable ahora que en la mañana de primavera en que la contempló por primera vez; las dudas y temores de Adam se suavizaron merced a esta influencia y hasta le pareció contemplar el suave rostro de Dinah, asegurándole, con la mirada, cuanto él deseaba saber.

Desde luego, a semejante hora no esperaba encontrar a la joven en su casa, pero echó pie a tierra, ató el caballo junto a la puerta y se dispuso a preguntar adonde había ido Dinah, pues estaba resuelto a seguirla y a llevársela consigo. Le dijeron que se había marchado a un pueblecito situado a cinco kilómetros de distancia para predicar, como tenía por costumbre. La vieja añadió que cualquiera podía indicarle dónde estaba la aldea. Adam volvió a montar el caballo y se dirigió a la población más cercana. Al llegar a la posada echó pie a tierra y comió apresuradamente, evitando cuanto pudo la charla y las preguntas del hostelero; deseaba ir cuanto antes a la aldea en que se hallaba Dinah. Sin embargo, no pudo salir antes de las cuatro de la tarde, y se dijo que tal vez encontraría a la joven por el camino. Mucho antes de llegar a él, pudo divisar el pequeño pueblo gris desprovisto de árboles, y al aproximarse oyó unas voces que entonaban un himno. Adam pensó que tal vez fuese el último y se dispuso a salir al encuentro de la joven cuando ésta emprendiese el camino de regreso. Retrocedió pues hasta llegar a lo alto de la colina y se sentó en una piedra a esperar a Dinah.

Eligió ese sitio por estar al abrigo de cualquier mirada indiscreta y rodeado de la inmensidad del cielo y de la tranquila luz de la tarde.

Dinah tardó mucho más de lo que él se había figurado. Tuvo que esperar una hora por lo menos; mientras tanto se alargaban las sombras y disminuía la intensidad de la luz. Por fin distinguió su negra figura que salía de entre las casas grises y se acercaba al pie de la montaña. Al joven le pareció que andaba muy despacio, pero en realidad avanzaba con su paso rápido y seguro. Cuando tomó el sendero que había de conducirla a lo alto de la colina, Adam no se movió, pues no quería presentarse demasiado pronto. Luego temió asustarla, pero se tranquilizó al recordar la serenidad de la joven quien, ciertamente, parecía estar siempre preparada para lo que pudiese ocurrir.

¿Qué estaría pensando mientras subía la colina? Quizás había hallado la paz completa sin él y dejaría de sentir alguna necesidad de amor.

Cuando estuvo muy cerca, Adam se puso en pie. Precisamente en aquel instante Dinah se había detenido para mirar hacia atrás, como suele hacerse cuando se sube una montaña. El joven se alegró porque, con el fino instinto del enamorado, comprendió que sería mejor que le oyese antes de verle. Se acercó a tres pasos de distancia y pronunció su nombre. Ella se estremeció sin mirar a su alrededor, como si no relacionase la voz con un ser vivo. Adam la llamó otra vez y comprendió las ideas que cruzaban su mente. Estaba tan acostumbrada a creer que las impresiones no eran más que mensajes espirituales, que no buscó siquiera al ser material que debía de acompañar a la voz.

Pero al fin se volvió. ¡Cuánto amor había en los suaves ojos grises que fijó en el joven! No se sobresaltó al verle, ni pronunció una sola palabra, pero se acercó a él de modo que Adam pudo rodearle el talle con el brazo.

Continuaron andando en silencio, mientras ella derramaba cálidas lágrimas. Adam estaba contento y silencioso. Dinah fue la primera en hablar.

—Adam —dijo—, así lo quiere Dios. Mi alma está tan unida a la suya que sin usted apenas puede decirse que vivo. Y ahora que está a mi lado y siento que nuestros corazones están penetrados con el mismo amor, noto en mí más fuerza para cumplir las órdenes de Dios.

Adam se detuvo para contemplar sus sinceros y amorosos ojos.

—En tal caso, Dinah, no volveremos a separarnos hasta que nos desuna la muerte.

Dicho esto se besaron con profunda alegría.

No hay cosa más grande para dos almas enamoradas que observar que están unidas para toda la vida y que se ayudarán mutuamente en todos sus trabajos; que una se apoyará en la otra en todas las tristezas, que se consolará en todos los pesares y que, en adelante, ya no serán más que una hasta el momento de la última despedida.

LV

CAMPANAS DE BODA

Un mes después de aquel encuentro en la montaña y en una fría mañana de los últimos días de noviembre, Adam y Dinah contrajeron matrimonio. Tal suceso interesó en extremo al pueblo entero. Todos los obreros del señor Burge tuvieron fiesta y también los del señor Poyser, de modo que la mayor parte de ellos asistieron a la boda vistiendo sus mejores trajes. Creo que no hubo un habitante de Hayslope, mencionado en esta historia y que aún residiera en la parroquia en aquella época, que no estuviera presente en la iglesia para asistir al casamiento de Adam y Dinah, o que, por lo menos, no se hubiera situado a la puerta para verlos salir. La señora Irwine y sus hijas esperaban en su coche a las puertas del templo (porque ya tenían coche) para estrechar las manos de los novios y desearles toda suerte de felicidades; y en ausencia de la señorita Lydia Donnithorne, la señora Best, el señor Mills y el señor Craig, creyeron oportuno representar a la «familia» del cazadero en aquella ocasión. El paseo del cementerio estaba lleno de rostros conocidos, muchos de los cuales contemplaron a Dinah el día en que predicó en el parque, y no era de extrañar el interés que despertaba en todos aquel casamiento, porque nunca se conoció en Hayslope una historia semejante a la de la joven, ni otras circunstancias como las que originaron su casamiento con Adam. Bess Cranage, que vestía su traje y su gorro más hermosos, lloraba como una Magdalena, aunque no supiera el porqué, pues, como Wiry Ben observó juiciosamente, Dinah no se marcharía, y si Bess estaba triste, lo mejor que podía hacer era seguir su ejemplo y casarse con un hombre honrado que la quisiera. Al lado de Bess y ya dentro de la puerta de la iglesia, estaban los hijos de Poyser, asomando el rostro por encima del respaldo de los bancos para contemplar la misteriosa ceremonia. Totty estaba muy inquieta, pues temía ver salir muy envejecida a Dinah, pues ella creía que ninguna persona casada podía ser joven.

Yo envidio a todos los que pudieron presenciar la salida de Adam y de Dinah. Esta no vestía de negro aquella mañana, porque su tía Poyser no quiso correr tal peligro de atraer la mala suerte y le regaló un traje de boda de color gris, aunque de acuerdo con la moda cuáquera, porque acerca de este detalle Dinah se mostró intransigente. Por eso su blanco rostro se mostraba con dulce gravedad bajo un gorro cuáquero de color gris, sin sonrojarse ni sonreír, aunque con los labios temblorosos de la emoción. Adam, que le ofrecía el brazo, andaba erguido y con la cabeza echada hacia atrás como si quisiera contemplar mejor el mundo, pero no porque estuviese más orgulloso aquella mañana, como suele ocurrirles a los novios, pues en su felicidad nada tema que ver la opinión de la gente. En su alegría había cierta tristeza y Dinah, que lo sabía, no estaba resentida.

Otras parejas seguían a los novios: Martin Poyser, alegre y resplandeciente, daba el brazo a Mary Burge, que era la doncella de honor; luego les seguía Seth, sereno y feliz, dando el brazo a la señora Poyser, y cerraba la marcha Barde Massey al lado de Lisbeth. La anciana llevaba un traje y un gorro nuevos, y estaba tan contenta de que su hijo le hubiera conseguido la hija que ella deseaba, que ni siquiera tenía el menor deseo de quejarse.

Barde Massey consintió en asistir a la boda a ruegos insistentes de Adam, aunque protestando contra el matrimonio en general y contra el de un hombre inteligente en particular. Sin embargo, el señor Poyser, mientras estaban comiendo, le acusó de haber dado a la novia dos besos en vez de uno, que era el que imponía la costumbre.

Siguiendo a la última pareja iba el señor Irwine, muy satisfecho de haber casado a los dos jóvenes. Había visto a Adam en los peores momentos de su dolor, ¿y qué mejor cosecha pudo producir aquel triste tiempo de siembra? El amor que llevó la esperanza y el consuelo en la hora de la desesperación y que entró

en el oscuro calabozo y en el alma aún más oscura de Hetty, aquel amor fuerte y apacible, sería el compañero de Adam y su auxilio hasta la hora de la muerte.

En la puerta del cementerio hubo muchos saludos y bendiciones, y el señor Poyser pudo corresponder muy alegremente a todos, porque aquel día estaba muy satisfecho. La señora Poyser, por su parte, apenas pudo contestar cosa alguna cuando sus vecinos le estrecharon la mano; y Lisbeth se echaba a llorar ante cualquiera que le dijese que había rejuvenecido.

—Esta noticia alegrará mucho a Arthur —dijo el señor Irwine a su madre en el momento de emprender la marcha—. En cuanto lleguemos a casa le escribiré.

EPÍLOGO

Corrían los últimos días de junio de 1807. Hacía ya media hora que se había cerrado el taller de Adam Bede, en otro tiempo propiedad de Jonathan Burge, y la suave luz de la tarde caía sobre la hermosa casa de paredes marrones y de tejado gris.

Salía de la casa una figura que conocemos muy bien y que se protegía los ojos con una mano para mirar a gran distancia, porque los rayos del sol, que caían sobre su blanco gorro y en sus cabellos castaños, eran realmente deslumbrantes. Luego la mujer se alejó de la luz del sol para mirar hacia la puerta. Ya se podía distinguir bien su rostro dulce y pálido, que apenas había sufrido algún cambio; sólo estaba un poco más lleno, y congeniaba más con su figura maternal, que todavía se veía ligera y activa en su traje negro riguroso.

—Ya le veo, Seth —dijo Dinah volviéndose hacia la casa—. Salgamos a su encuentro. Ven, Lisbeth. Ven con tu madre.

Respondió a esta llamada una niña sonrosada, de cabellos de color castaño claro y ojos grises, que apenas contaría cuatro años y que, corriendo, fue a coger la mano de su madre.

—Acompáñanos, tío Seth —dijo Dinah.

—Ya vamos —contestó Seth desde dentro.

Seth tardó poco en aparecer y se inclinó al atravesar la puerta, pues estaba más alto que de costumbre a causa de la negra cabeza de su sobrino de dos años, subido sobre sus hombros.

—Vale más que lo lleves en brazos, Seth —dijo Dinah mirando con cariño al pequeño.

—No, a Adam le gusta mucho que lo lleve en hombros y no hay inconveniente en complacerle.

El pequeño Adam respondió a estas palabras de cariño golpeando con sus pies el pecho de su tío Seth, para quien estar al lado de Dinah y dejarse tiranizar por los hijos de ésta y de Adam constituía el colmo de felicidad.

—¿Dónde lo has visto? —preguntó cuando ya estaban en el campo de al lado—. Yo no lo distingo todavía.

—Entre los setos del camino —contestó Dinah—. He podido divisar su cabeza y sus hombros. Ahora aparece de nuevo.

—Buenos ojos tienes para verle —contestó Seth sonriendo—. Te pareces a mi pobre madre. Siempre espiaba la llegada de Adam y, a pesar de su mala vista, lo descubría antes que nadie.

—Ha tardado más de lo que pensaba —observó Dinah sacando de un bolsillo el reloj de Arthur.

—Tenían mucho que decirse —replicó Seth—, y no hay duda de que la entrevista ha sido emocionante para los dos. Casi han trascurrido ocho años desde que se vieron por última vez.

—Sí —dijo Dinah—. Adam estaba muy impresionado esta mañana, al pensar en el cambio que habría sufrido ese pobre joven tras la enfermedad y los años trascurridos. Además, la muerte de esa pobre desgraciada cuando volvía a nuestro lado, habrá contribuido más todavía a su dolor.

—Mira, Adam —dijo Seth tomando en brazos a su sobrino y señalando a alguna distancia—. Ahí viene papá.

Dinah apresuró el paso; la pequeña Lisbeth echó a correr a toda velocidad y se agarró a la pierna de su padre. Adam la levantó para darle un beso, pero Dinah pudo advertir en su rostro evidentes señales de agitación.

—¿Qué? ¿Quieres que te tome en brazos, pequeño? —dijo tratando de sonreír cuando el niño le tendía sus bracitos, dando muestras de ingratitud al abandonar al tío Seth ahora que ya tenía otro protector.

—Me ha impresionado mucho, Dinah —dijo Adam cuando echaron a andar.

—¿Estaba muy cambiado? —preguntó Dinah.

—Sí y no. Yo le habría conocido en cualquier parte, pero ya no tiene el mismo color en el rostro y, además, parece estar muy triste. Sin embargo, los médicos dicen que se curará con los aires de su tierra. Parece ser que no tiene nada realmente mal y que solamente le ha debilitado la fiebre. De todos modos habla como siempre y me sonreía como cuando éramos jóvenes. Es maravilloso que cuando sonríe tenga la misma mirada que en otros tiempos.

—Yo nunca he visto sonreír a ese pobre muchacho —dijo Dinah.

—Pues ya le verás sonreír mañana —contestó Adam—. En cuanto hubimos dominado nuestra mutua emoción para poder hablar, lo primero que hizo fue preguntarme por ti. «Supongo que no habrá cambiado», dijo. «Recuerdo muy bien su rostro». Yo le contesté que no habías cambiado nada —añadió Adam mirando con cariño los ojos que su esposa había vuelto hacia él—. «Sólo está un poco más llena, como es natural después de siete años de matrimonio». «¿Me permitirás que mañana vaya a visitarla?», preguntó. «Tengo grandes deseos de decirle lo mucho que he pensado en ella».

—¿Le dijiste que continúo usando su reloj? —preguntó Dinah.

—Sí. Hemos hablado mucho de ti, porque dice que nunca ha conocido a otra mujer que se te pareciera. «Un día me convertiré en metodista», ha dicho. «Y cuando ella predique iré a escucharla». Pero yo le contesté: «No podrá hacer eso, señor, porque la Conferencia ha prohibido predicar a las mujeres, y así mi esposa sólo va a casa de sus vecinos para conversar amistosamente con ellos».

—¡Ah! —exclamó Seth, que no pudo contener un comentario—. Esa Conferencia fue una cosa lastimosa. Si Dinah opinase como yo, habríamos dejado a los partidarios de Wesley para ingresar en algún grupo que no pusiera trabas a la libertad cristiana.

—No, muchacho, no —dijo Adam—. Ella tuvo razón, y tú estabas equivocado. Piensa en que no hay ninguna regla que satisfaga a todos. La mayor parte de las mujeres predicadoras hacían más mal que bien, porque no tenían las condiciones de Dinah. Ella lo comprendió así y ha dado un ejemplo de sumisión, porque eso no le impide dedicarse a enseñar a la gente. Yo estoy conforme con ella y apruebo lo que hizo.

Seth guardó silencio. Aquel era un asunto acerca del cual reinaba alguna disconformidad entre los dos hermanos y por eso casi nunca se aludía a él. Entonces Dinah, deseando cambiar de tema cuanto antes, dijo:

—¿Te has acordado de decir al coronel Donnithorne lo que mis tíos te encargaron?

—Sí. Pasado mañana irá a Hall Farm acompañado del señor Irwine. Este llegó mientras hablábamos de eso y, al principio, se opuso a esa visita para que Arthur no se emocionara demasiado. «Lo primero que hay que hacer», dijo, «es reponerse, y luego quedará en libertad para cuanto se le antoje. Pero hasta entonces no le permitiré desobedecer las órdenes de su tutor». Al parecer, el señor Irwine está muy satisfecho de tenerle a su lado.

Adam hizo una pausa y luego añadió:

—Fue muy emocionante el momento en que nos vimos. Él nunca había tenido ninguna noticia de la pobre Hetty, hasta que el señor Irwine fue a recibirle a Londres, porque se extraviaron las cartas que le escribieron durante su viaje. Lo primero que me dijo, después de estrecharnos las manos, fue: «No he podido hacer nada por ella, Adam. La pobrecilla vivió lo bastante para sufrir, y yo esperaba la ocasión de poder hacer algo en su favor. Por eso tenías mucha razón cuando me advertiste que hay faltas que nunca pueden ser reparadas».

—Aquí vienen el señor y la señora Poyser —observó Seth.

—Así es —dijo Dinah—. Corre, Lisbeth. Ve a dar un beso a la tía Poyser. Entra en casa a descansar, Adam; éste ha sido un día muy penoso para ti.

GEORGE ELIOT (Arbury Farm 1819 Londres 1880), pseudónimo con el que se conoce a la novelista inglesa Mary Ann Evans, pasó su infancia y juventud en el rico campo de Warwickshire, telón de fondo de la mayoría de sus novelas, y también de *Adam Bede*. Recibió una educación esmerada y en su juventud practicó con entusiasmo el calvinismo metodista. Más tarde se interesó por todas las corrientes filosóficas de su tiempo, que marcarían la evolución de su existencia y de su obra. Como otras novelistas inglesas de su época, se interesó por los problemas vinculados con la mujer y su libertad, yendo mucho más allá en sus reivindicaciones. Entre 1854 y 1878 convivió sin casarse con George Henry Lewes, y en 1880, seis meses antes de morir, se casó con J. W. Cross, viejo amigo y admirador.

Notas

[1] Mum significa «¡chitón!» o «¡silencio!». < <

[2] Tierra de la abundancia concedida a los israelitas en Egipto. < <

[3] El volumen de poemas titulado *Lyrical Ballads* fue publicado anónimamente en 1798 por Wordsworth y Coleridge. «El viejo marinero», de Coleridge, es, significativamente, la historia de un hombre que comete un crimen contra natura. < <

[4] «Tentetieso». < <

[5] Estatua gigante, supuestamente de Memnon, príncipe etíope muerto en la guerra de Troya, que emitía unas notas cuando los primeros rayos del sol la rozaban. < <

[6] Vixen significa mujer colérica, bravía. < <